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charges from
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reports.
PAGE B3

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SPORTS

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Pat Hill has become
the big 'Dog
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PAGE D1



SPOTLIGHT

KMPH radio's Silva
Harapetian has had
to work hard to make
her voice heard.
PAGE H1

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WEATHER, B8



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PERSONALITIES



ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE

War ultimately led Iranian-Armenian Silva Harapetian to Fresno, where she works as a reporter for radio station KMPH, FM 107.5. Now 27, she leads a Spartan life as she focuses on her job.

A long journey

KMPH radio's
Silva
Harapetian
has had
to work hard
to make her
voice heard.



SILVA HARAPETIAN — SPECIAL TO THE BEE

This 1984 photo was taken of Harapetian, right, and sister Arsineh when they lived in Teheran, Iran. War between Iran and Iraq prompted the family to flee to Germany in 1987.

Harapetian visited
Armenia in 1978 with
her parents, Haroot
and Anna. The
family ended up in
Southern California,
where Harapetian
went to school
before moving to
Fresno in 1998.



SILVA HARAPETIAN
— SPECIAL TO THE
BEE

BY RICK BENTLEY
THE FRESNO BEE

Silva Harapetian is the only staff member in the KMPH, FM 107.5, radio newsroom. She calmly types the last words of a sentence on the left side of the screen of her computer, oblivious to the chaos that has erupted around her.

The distinct sound of three telephones ringing bounces off the concrete walls painted white. The rings mix with the sounds of a CNN report on terrorism coming from a small television mounted high on the north wall of the newsroom, which is about the size of a living room. Adding to the auditory chaos is a police scanner that blasts an update about a shooting in Madera.

Harapetian's hazel eyes remain fixed on the computer screen. Finally, she reaches over to answer one of the telephones.

"Hold on, Tom," Harapetian says to South Valley reporter Tom Wells. After taking care of the other two ringing telephones, Harapetian turns her attention back to Wells. He dictates a report on an arrest that will have

to be voiced and edited for the station's 4 p.m. radio newscast only minutes away.

Being able to handle chaos is a necessary skill for work in the fast-paced, always-on-deadline world of news radio. Reporters also have to be curious. And, most importantly, they have to write and speak clearly.

Harapetian, a 27-year-old Iranian-Armenian, spoke only broken English 15 years ago when her family escaped from Iran in 1987. Despite a background that worked against a career in radio, Harapetian has become a respected member of the news-gathering community.

"During her tenure at NewsRadio, she has established a reputation for being the hardest-working electronic reporter in Fresno. It's deserved," says Don Schrack, KMPH's news director. "What her peers outside of this station don't see is that she works just as hard in the NewsRadio studios. She is the most complete journalist among all of Fresno's radio and TV reporters."

Overcoming obstacles

Finding success in radio hasn't been easy. Harapetian had to survive years of hard work, frustration and plenty
Please see RADIO, Page H6

Radio: Woman has 'fire in her belly'

Continued from Page H1 of criticism.

Earlier in her career, Harapetian was taken off the air for six months because her writing was considered raw and her accent too thick. She spent that time working on her writing, asking for help from colleagues and spending hours in the recording booth recording and re-recording her voice.

Since Harapetian's family escaped from Iran, she has grown from a confused girl to a determined woman.

But it takes only seconds to bring back the memories of the terror that invaded her childhood.

"When the bombing of Kosovo started, CNN was on the television," Harapetian says. "The sounds of the bombs dropping was too much. I couldn't take it. I had to walk outside."

Harapetian's voice cracks under the strain of years of memories. She talks about others, but she's really talking about her own life.

The last time Harapetian heard the sounds of bombs dropping up close, she was a 12-year-old growing up in Teheran, Iran.

In September 1980, Iraq's Saddam Hussein officially abolished the 1975 peace treaty between his country and Iran. He announced that the Shatt al Arab area was returning to Iraqi sovereignty. Iran objected. The countries conducted bombing raids deep into each other's territory. On Sept. 23, 1980, Iraqi troops marched into Iranian territory, beginning an eight-year war.

Harapetian's family survived the early years of the turmoil better than many. Her father, Haroot Harapetian, kept the family fed through his work as an electrician.

"I have wonderful memories of growing up. Sometimes I smell something that takes me back to my childhood. I also remember all of the things that came along with that. I remember the war, the bombings, the demonstrations," Harapetian says. "I wasn't old enough to understand the way I do now."

The world Harapetian grew up in was one in which women covered their entire bodies as soon as they showed any sign of being a female. Her world was one in which, upon graduation from high school, women married because they had few other options. She grew up a Christian, a minority in a world where Islam is the predominant religion. She grew up in a world of fear created by the bombings.

"It got to a point when they [Iraq] were running out of places to bomb. So they would target civilians. You would never know when the next bombings would come," Harapetian says.

Harapetian, her father, mother Anna Aghabegi and younger sister Arsineh slept on the living-room floor. They were just steps from a front door that always remained open to allow for a quick escape to the shelter of the basement in case of an attack.

One night, sirens sounded to warn of enemy airplanes and bombs. The family ran outside and into the basement until the alert ended. The bombs fell less than half a mile from Harapetian's home. The impact shook the ground. Windows shattered.

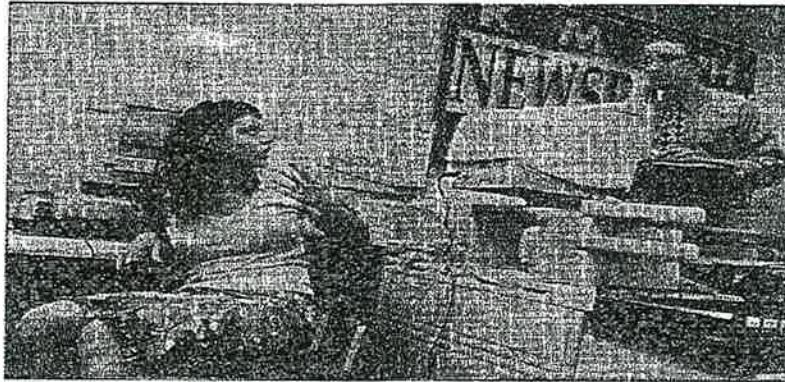
"I think that is when my father decided to leave," Harapetian says. "The thing my parents always talked about was that they wanted to give us a better life. They grew up in Iran while the shah was there. So they had a different life. For us they knew it would not be that way."

Because the war with Iraq had been raging for years, leaving Iran was not easy. Harapetian's family members had to abandon most of their belongings so as not to tip Iranian authorities that they weren't coming back. There could be no hints their trip was anything but a family vacation.

Using an illegal German visa, Harapetian's family left for Germany in 1987. All they had were the clothes they could carry and a few Pahlavi gold coins Harapetian's mother had sewn into handbags and clothing.

"My father didn't find out about the coins until much later. Had they been found, we would have never been allowed to leave the country," Harapetian says.

The goal was to get to Southern California, where



ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE
Silva Harapetian, left, with KMPH's Aron Bender, says, "I have worked very hard to even be . . . satisfied with some of the stuff I do here."

relatives lived. That trip would require a two-year stop in Germany.

"You say you have no paperwork. I am a refugee," Harapetian says of arriving in Frankfurt, Germany. "You never knew where you are going to end up. You could end up in a concentration camp-type place."

The family ended up in a motel in the city of Hürth, in western Germany. One room served as their home for eight months. The family eventually moved to an apartment.

Harapetian tried to adjust. Now a teen-ager, she found herself in a world where she didn't understand the German people or their language.

She continues to fight with language problems.

"Silva once told me she never had the privilege of growing up speaking English. I never think about speaking English as a privilege, but for someone in our industry who didn't have that luxury, it is a huge privilege," Schrack says. "She was an infant when she got here as far as the way she could write, her spelling. But there was never a thought of giving up on Silva. She was rough, but she was never unwilling to work."

Harapetian's battles with English continue even as she types the story dictated to her by Wells. She writes and rewrites the 15 lines, trying to find the exact words to tell the story.

The search for the correct words is easier these days. Her only means of communicating while in Germany was English, which she had learned while attending an Armenian private school in Iran. She also knew a few German phrases she learned watching television.

"We went from a world where we had so much to a world where we had nothing. We didn't know anyone. I lived through it, and I still do not understand how my parents did it," Harapetian says.

"I had the toughest time in Germany. I was just turning into a teen. I was going through puberty, so I had mood swings. I remember having fights with my parents. They weren't doing too well because they were having trouble adjusting."

"I remember spending a lot of time on my bike just riding around town."

It took almost two years, but Harapetian finally started to become comfortable with her new world in Germany. She made a few friends. Her little sister, Arine, was born. Harapetian even got a summer job at a local ice-cream parlor.

A week before the second anniversary of the family's escape to Germany, she got a telephone call saying the American Embassy had given the family permission to go to the United States.

"I remember saying 'thank you very much.' I hung up the telephone, told my parents we were going to America, went to my room, shut the door and sat there. All I could think about was what I would take and what I would leave behind," Harapetian says.

A new world

When Silva was almost 15, she started life again in the United States. The family moved to Glendale and lived in an apartment near her mother's aunt.

Harapetian put her energy into high school, taking extra classes while participating in track, dance and student government.

"I had a full plate by the time I was a senior. I wasn't a typical teen-ager who went to parties, I was very focused. I think unconsciously I was trying to prove I could be right there [in schoolwork] along with all of the other students despite all of the disadvantage," Harapetian

says.

While taking a communications class at the University of Southern California, Harapetian discovered her love of broadcasting. She produced and hosted talk shows on campus. Then she landed an internship at KCBS television in Los Angeles.

Getting a job four years after graduation proved difficult. She sent hundreds of audition tapes to television news directors around the country. When she got no response, Harapetian started calling the news directors. On advice from KMPH, Channel 26, news director Roger Gadley, Harapetian talked to radio station KMPH's Schrack about a job.

"She was very, very green," Schrack recalls. "But I have never met anyone who wanted a job as bad as she did. It was almost as if she had a window on her stomach, and you could see the fire in her belly."

Moving again

In October 1998, Harapetian packed up her white Celica and moved to Fresno. She faced another move in a lifetime of moves.

"You can imagine how that set with my parents. They had sacrificed everything for their children, and then I abandoned them. They wanted to know why I couldn't just get a regular job and be like everyone else: graduate, get married, have children and live next door," Harapetian says.

As the seconds tick toward the radio station's afternoon newscast, Harapetian becomes even more intense. She bounces from her work space — really just a corner of the room decorated with only a handout calendar — to a small recording booth two steps away.

As soon as she has recorded the audio for a story she is working on about the shooting in Madera, Harapetian moves to a different computer to edit the recording.

Her fingers speedily tap at the keys. Harapetian stops only long enough to push back her long, dark-brown hair from her face and to tell KMPH weatherman Kopi Sotiropoulos that she won't be able to attend the upcoming Greek food festival.

Her excuse: She will be in Las Vegas working on a telethon to raise money for Armenians.

Harapetian's priority always has been to get better at her job. That's her focus. She lives a Spartan life, renting a single room from Cathy Isom, the radio station's managing editor, who calls Harapetian "a firecracker."

"She doesn't even sleep in a bed. She has a sleeping bag. There are no pictures or other items. I almost feel guilty charging her to stay there," Isom says.

Isom's 2 1/2-year-old son, Nickolas, has brought out the maternal side of Harapetian.

"Nickolas is crazy about her. There is something about Silva that brings out this joy in my son, that brings this magic into his eyes instantly," Isom says.

Harapetian even has put her personal life on hold.

"This journey of the last three years has been tough on me. I have worked very hard to even be able to be satisfied with some of the stuff I do here. I eventually want to get married. At the same time, I have spent so much time getting to this point I don't want to just throw that away," Harapetian says.

"When I have a bad day, I think about what I have instead of what I don't. I think about what could have been if I had not had the opportunities along the way."

► The reporter can be reached at rbentley@fresnobee.com or at 441-6355.