



AMERICAN TURKISH  
ASSOCIATION OF  
WASHINGTON DC

OCTOBER 2025  
ISSUE 7

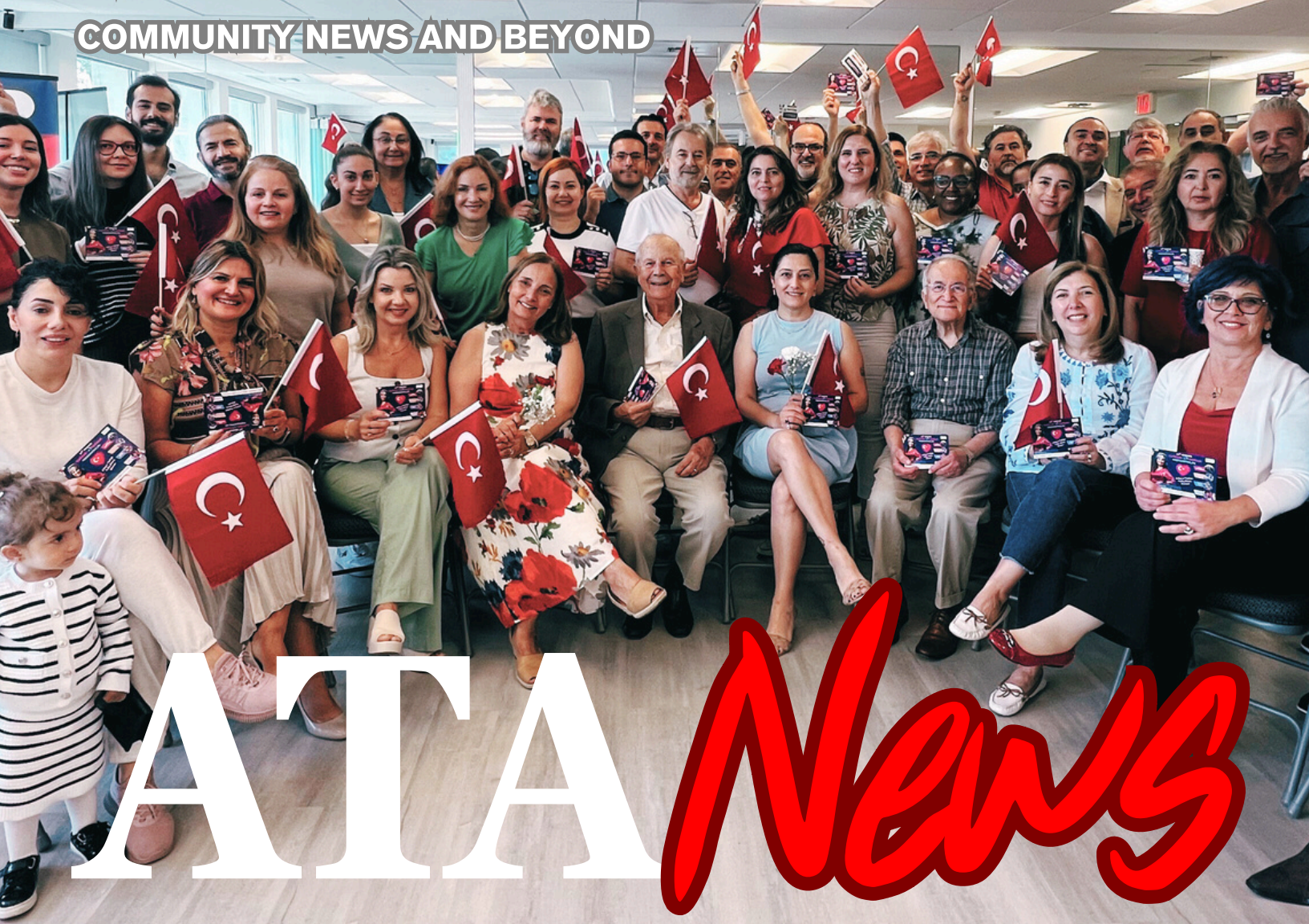
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**DC TURKISH FESTIVAL 2025**

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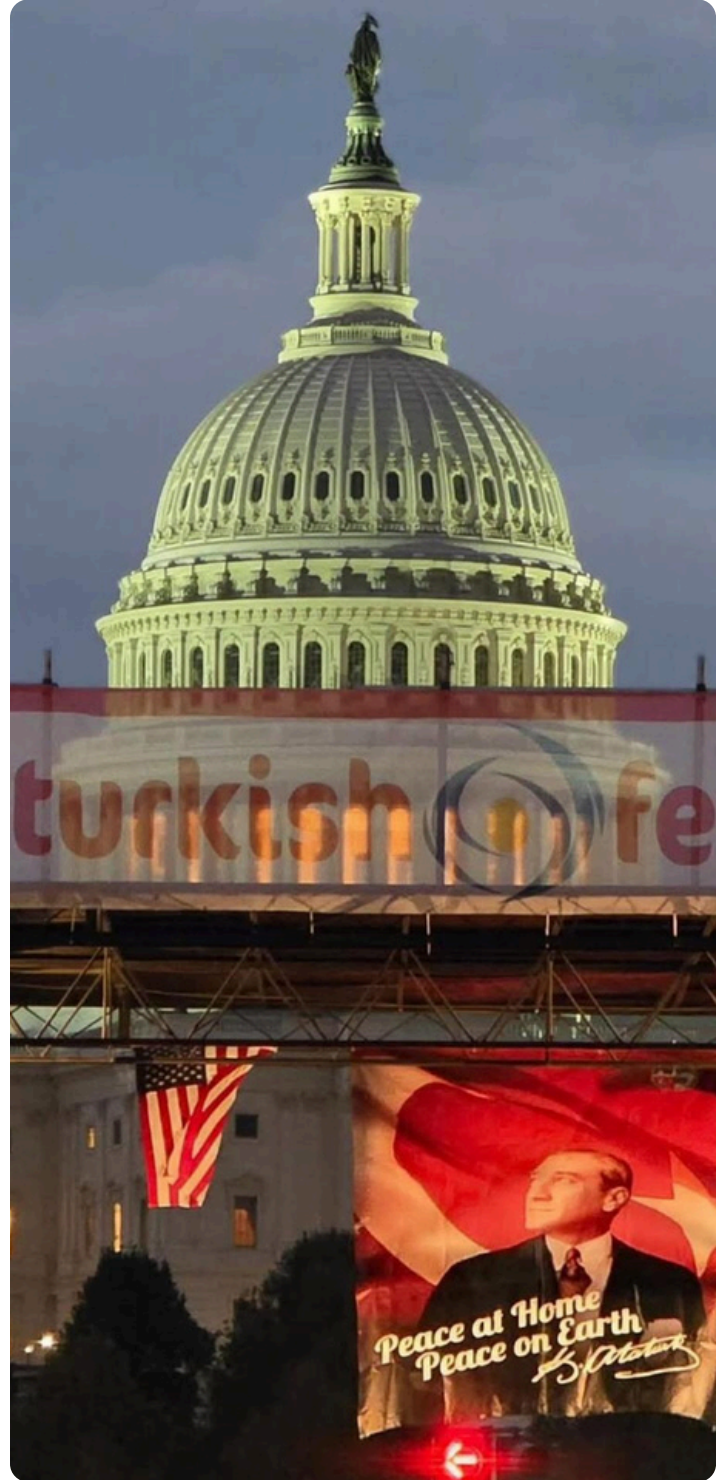
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## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Dear Friends,

As the colorful energy of summer faded into fall, our hearts were still full from an incredible season of events, connection, and cultural pride. After our lively spring events concluded, we rolled up our sleeves and dove straight into preparations for our biggest celebration of the year – the Turkish Festival, proudly held as part of Turkish Heritage Month.

The spirit of teamwork truly shone this year. Collectively, our dedicated volunteers and board members poured thousands of hours into organizing both the festival and the many Heritage Month events that led up to it. From our Street Beats and Eats Fundraiser where our famous kokoreç made a delicious debut, to our warm Brunch at the new ATA-DC House, to the Turkish Dance Workshop with Yeliz Dingler, and even a fun Turkish Coffee Fortune Reading Workshop – each event celebrated our culture and community in its own unique way. And, of course, we wrapped it all up with our award-winning Turkish Festival in the heart of Washington, D.C. This year's festival was a true testament to our resilience and passion. Despite the city shutdown and the museum closures – meaning no foot traffic – we still welcomed over 20,000 guests who came to enjoy the sights, sounds, and flavors of Türkiye! Our heartfelt thanks to our 104 amazing volunteers many of whom are our YCAP students and the entire board of directors – all of whom worked tirelessly as volunteers – to make this day such a success.

This fall also marks a very special milestone: one year since we signed the contract for our very own ATA-DC House. In just twelve months, this dream has transformed into a vibrant community hub. After several months of renovations, the house now proudly features four classrooms for our Atatürk School, a fully equipped kitchen for catering and cultural events, and a welcoming hall for gatherings and celebrations. None of this would have been possible without the unwavering support of you – our donors, friends, and community members.

Thank you – from the bottom of my heart – for being part of this journey, for your continued support, and for helping us keep Turkish culture alive and thriving in the Washington, D.C. area. Together, we're not just building a house – we're building a community, one smile, one song, and one shared story at a time.

With heartfelt thanks,

Sertap Schreffler

**PRESIDENT OF ATA-DC**





# turkish festival



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## WHAT OUR SPONSORS SAID

For over 30 years, David Saltzman and I have supported Turkish American organizations nationwide. But the number of successful organizations has not kept up in recent years. In that sense, ATA-DC is exceptional, serving as an organization of its time and the future, always. We believe the Turkish Festival and Republic Day Gala are beautiful celebrations. What a Turkish Delight your leadership has been. Thank you!

GUNAY EVINCH, SALTZMAN & EVINCH

I've been supporting ATA-DC as RE/MAX since the first festival in 2002, and each year it's a joy to set up the RE/MAX balloon with my family on Pennsylvania Avenue. It's a wonderful experience to reconnect with old friends and clients, meet new people, enjoy Turkish cuisine, and watch the amazing shows at the stage. I'm proud to support ATA-DC's efforts in promoting Turkish culture. Excellent work, ATA-DC!

MELIH CAKMAK, RE/MAX



## FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Hello friends and esteemed readers,

As we celebrate ATA-DC's 60th anniversary, this special edition of ATA-News feels like both a time capsule and a vision board – capturing six decades of community spirit while looking toward the future with the same mission.

From its humble beginnings in 1965 – when a few Turkish professionals gathered in living rooms to preserve their heritage – to today's thriving community hub in the heart of the DMV, ATA-DC's journey is a living story of dedication, unity, and pride. It is the story of countless volunteers who believed in something larger than themselves: a bridge between cultures, generations, and ideas.

This issue reflects that legacy in every page. You'll read about the vibrant success of the 23rd Annual DC Turkish Festival, the joy of seeing our Atatürk School welcome record enrollment in its new home, and the creative passion of Turkish-American entrepreneurs who continue to make their mark in the region. We also spotlight the Young Cultural Ambassadors, whose energy reminds us that the future of our community is already in inspiring hands.

Each article is a reflection of who we are – a community that celebrates not only our culture but also our shared humanity. Whether through food, music, education, or art, we continue to tell the story of Türkiye in the language of friendship and belonging.

So, let us all say together: **Happy 60th Birthday, ATA-DC!** This milestone year reminds us how much we can achieve when we work closely together with purpose and dedication. Moving forward, our focus remains on strengthening connections, expanding opportunities, and ensuring that ATA-DC continues to be a trusted and vibrant home for Turkish Americans and friends of Türkiye for many years to come.

Warm regards and cheers,

*Özge Övün-Sert*

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

ATA-DC SECRETARY GENERAL

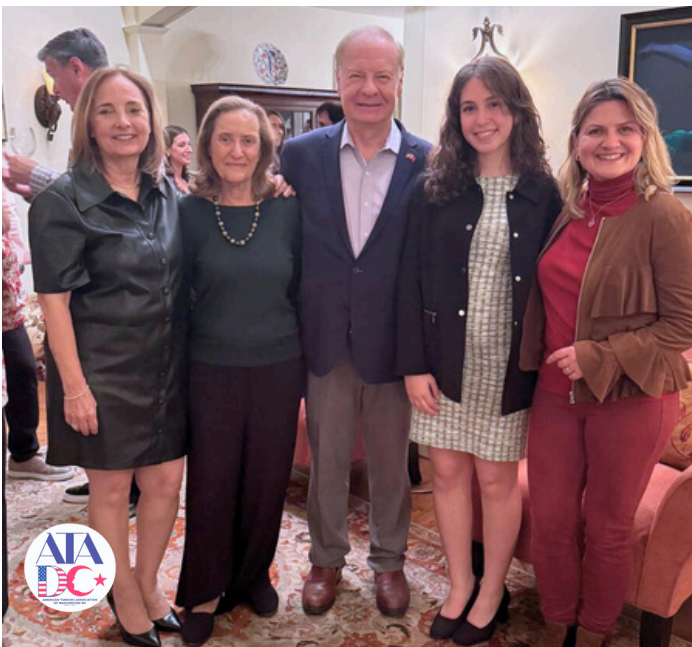




## LINCOLN MCCURDY'S NEW BOOK ON U.S.-TÜRKIYE RELATIONS

On October 25, Lincoln McCurdy unveiled his latest book, *A Chronicle of Turkish American Relations, 1923–2023*, at a special reception attended by diplomats, academics, and community leaders. The comprehensive volume offers an unprecedented century-long perspective on the evolution of bilateral ties between the United States and the Republic of Türkiye, tracing political, economic, and cultural milestones from the founding of the Turkish Republic to the present day. Drawing on historical documents, personal accounts, and institutional archives, McCurdy provides readers with a nuanced understanding of the challenges and progress that have shaped this dynamic transatlantic relationship.

A seasoned international affairs professional, McCurdy brings more than four decades of experience to the work. His career spans leadership roles in the U.S. government, private sector, and non-profit organizations, including the American-Turkish Council and the Turkish Coalition of America. Currently serving as Senior Advisor to the Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA), McCurdy continues to advocate for stronger people-to-people and diplomatic ties. His new book stands as both a scholarly contribution and a testament to his lifelong commitment to fostering mutual understanding between the Turkish and American communities.



## LIVANELI'S RUMI SUITE RECEIVES GRAMMY CONSIDERATION

The critically acclaimed *Rumi Suite*, a transcendent musical project inspired by the 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi, has been officially submitted for GRAMMY® consideration in two major categories: Best Global Album and Best Global Performance ("Right or Wrong" and "It's Called Love"). Composed by Zülfü Livaneli, one of Turkey's most celebrated artists, and arranged by pianist Henning Schmiedt, the album brings Rumi's timeless verses into a modern soundscape, fusing Anatolian folk, classical, and world music traditions into a harmonious spiritual journey. What makes *Rumi Suite* truly distinctive is its multi-faith ensemble—Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and secular artists from Türkiye, Balkans, Middle East, Europe, and the U.S.

Executive producers Serdar Ilhan and Ahmet Erentok have guided the project's vision with a commitment to cultural diplomacy and unity. Ilhan, a Turkish-American entrepreneur and founder of New York's world music venue DROM, brought his global network and expertise to the production. Erentok, an internationally recognized cultural advocate, provided strategic leadership and cross-border collaboration. Together, they helped shape *Rumi Suite* into more than an album—a musical bridge across faiths and continents, echoing Rumi's eternal message of peace, love, and shared humanity.



### ATA-DC CELEBRATES TURKISH HERITAGE MONTH WITH DYNAMIC FOLK DANCE WORKSHOP

ATA-DC brought the energy and spirit of Anatolia to life with a Turkish Folk Dance Workshop led by renowned dancer and instructor Yeliz Dingler. Held on Saturday, October 11, 2025, at the ATA-DC House in Falls Church, Virginia, the event invited participants to experience the rhythm, movement, and emotion of Türkiye's regional dance traditions as part of ATA-DC's Turkish Heritage Month celebrations.

Over the course of two lively sessions, attendees learned two distinct styles of folk dance. The first hour featured Turkish Roman, known for its expressive 9/8 rhythm and storytelling gestures rooted in the Romani culture of Türkiye. The second session explored Artvin Horon and Eastern Halay – dynamic group dances that reflect the communal spirit and diverse landscapes of the Black Sea and Eastern Anatolia. Participants of all backgrounds, ages 14 and up, joined in the movement, filling the ATA-DC House with music, laughter, and camaraderie.



### CUPS OF MYSTERY: FORTUNE READING

On October 12, ATA-DC hosted a delightful cultural afternoon celebrating one of Türkiye's most treasured customs – the art of Turkish coffee and fortune reading. Held at the ATA-DC House in Falls Church, the event was part of the Turkish Heritage Month festivities, drawing community members eager to experience this unique blend of culture, flavor, and tradition. Participants learned how to brew Turkish coffee while exploring the centuries-old tradition of reading fortunes from coffee grounds, known as fal.

The workshop offered not only a helpful introduction to the brewing process but also insights into the cultural symbolism and storytelling that make this ritual an enduring part of Turkish social life.



### DMV TURKISH MUSIC ENSEMBLE PARTICIPATED IN RESTON FESTIVAL

The DMV Turkish Music Ensemble participated in this year's Reston Multicultural Festival, presenting a program that featured both traditional Turkish music compositions and contemporary arrangements inspired by 1970s popular music. The group's performance highlighted the rich instrumentation and rhythmic variety characteristic of Turkish musical traditions, offering audiences an engaging cultural experience. Attendees described the Ensemble's presentation as a noteworthy part of the festival, commending the musicians for their professionalism and cohesive sound. The program reflected the Ensemble's commitment to fostering cultural understanding through music and contributed to the festival's overarching goal of celebrating diversity and promoting cross-cultural dialogue within the community.



Photo Credit - Saygın Geçener

### CLAY & KILN CLUB LAUNCHED ITS WORKSHOPS IN VIENNA, VA

Vienna's growing arts community welcomed a new addition in late September with the grand opening of Clay & Kiln Club, a ceramics studio founded by ATA-DC member and local artist Pinar Turhan. The grand opening event brought friends, neighbors, and art enthusiasts together to celebrate the launch of this new creative hub in the heart of town, and to support a fellow community member's new venture. Located on Maple Avenue, the two-story studio has been thoughtfully designed to support a wide range of ceramic activities. Clay & Kiln offers a variety of ways for the community to engage with ceramics. Classes are available for all skill levels.



### NEW PLACE IN TYSONS AREA OFFERS FRESH TURKISH FOOD



A new Turkish food truck has opened near 1961 Chain Bridge Road, offering locals an authentic taste of southern Türkiye. Operated by a young couple from Mersin, the truck serves traditional Turkish street foods such as kebabs, durums, and their signature Tantuni – a flavorful Mersin specialty made with seasoned meat, fresh vegetables, and aromatic spices. Generous portions, reasonable prices, and warm hospitality make each visit memorable, often complemented by a cup of traditional Turkish tea. Conveniently located beside the Exxon station, the food truck has quickly become a favorite stop for those seeking Turkish flavors and a welcoming atmosphere.



## **LEVENT YUKSEL GAVE A CONCERT IN WASHINGTON DC ON U.S. TOUR**

Beloved Turkish singer Levent Yüksel captivated audiences in Washington, D.C. with a powerful and soulful performance at The Howard Theatre, as part of his highly anticipated 2025 U.S. tour. Fans filled the historic venue to hear Yüksel's timeless hits and dynamic stage presence, blending nostalgia with fresh energy. His heartfelt renditions and warm connection with the crowd made for an evening that celebrated both Turkish music and its global resonance.

Yüksel's October tour, promoted by US Productions, spans four major cities – New York, Houston, Washington D.C., and Chicago. The journey began at Palladium Times Square in New York on October 16, followed by The Grand Venue Event Center in Houston on October 18, The Howard Theatre in Washington D.C. on October 20, and will conclude at Martyrs in Chicago on October 22. With each stop, the celebrated artist continues to share the rich emotion and artistry that have defined his career for over three decades, delighting audiences across the United States.



## **BOD PAIN MANAGEMENT AND WELLNESS CENTER OPENED ITS DOORS**



The recently opened BOD Pain Management & Wellness Center in Falls Church, VA is offering a fresh approach to chronic-pain relief, blending ancient healing traditions with modern medical care. Founded by a team, Dr. Ömür Kasımcı and Dilhan Kasımcı, with over 25 years of combined experience in healthcare and integrative medicine, the center provides personalized treatment plans in a welcoming environment where acupuncture, Tui Na, cupping, and other holistic modalities are used alongside evidence-based techniques to help patients reclaim their health. With its multidisciplinary team and commitment to addressing the root causes of discomfort, the center aims to become a go-to destination for anyone seeking to move beyond symptom relief toward lasting wellness.

The grand opening drew attention from the local community, with guests praising the center's serene atmosphere and compassionate staff. In addition to its broad treatment offerings, Dr. Kasımcı emphasizes a patient-centered philosophy: aiming not just to alleviate symptoms but to address root causes of pain, stress and fatigue. For more info, patients may visit [www.bodpainmanagement.com](http://www.bodpainmanagement.com).



## ATA-DC HOUSE HOSTED ESTATE PLANNING SEMINAR BY TPF



ATA-DC hosted an insightful and engaging event in partnership with the Turkish Philanthropy Funds (TPF) on the topic of “Trusts vs. Wills and Charitable Giving.” The event brought together members of our community who are interested in learning how to plan for the future while also making a lasting difference through philanthropy.

Our guest speaker, Todd J. Bornstein, Esq., delivered an informative presentation that helped demystify the often complex concepts of trusts, wills, and estate planning. He emphasized how thoughtful estate planning not only provides peace of mind for individuals and families but can also create long-term positive impact through charitable giving. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions, share experiences, and explore ways to align their personal legacy with their philanthropic values. The discussion highlighted how careful planning today can ensure security for loved ones while supporting the causes that matter most.

In her remarks, ATA-DC President Sevtap Schreffler expressed her heartfelt appreciation to Todd J. Bornstein for sharing his expertise and to The Turkish Philanthropy Funds (TPF) for their partnership in making the event possible. Schreffler added, “We are deeply grateful to everyone who attended and contributed to this meaningful conversation about community, generosity, and the future.”

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## STREET EATS, GREAT BEATS, AND EVEN BETTER COMPANY

BY GAMZE ÇAKMAK

On September 27, 2025, ATA-DC members, friends, and supporters came together for a truly memorable evening, a heartfelt fundraiser supporting this year's Turkish Festival on October 19. Hosted by Chef Aynur and her family at their lovely home in Bethesda, Maryland, the night overflowed with delicious homemade dishes, nostalgic Turkish music, warm conversations, and the famous Turkish hospitality that made everyone feel instantly at home, everything that makes the ATA-DC community so special.

The theme, Street Eats & Beats, captured the heart of Turkish street food culture with a fun, laid-back vibe. Guests were welcomed by the comforting aromas of freshly grilled dishes, laughter in the air, and the sound of Turkish hits played by Seksenrock, who set the perfect tone for the evening.

Despite a bit of rain, spirits stayed high with more than 60 guests gathered under tents and umbrellas, sharing plates, stories, and laughter late into the evening. Conversations flowed easily, some about favorite street foods from home, others about past festivals and upcoming plans. The combination of delicious food, live music, and genuine connection turned a drizzly evening into something magical.



Aynur and Mustafa Ozdemir graciously opened their home to fundraiser attendees in Bethesda, MD.

ATA-DC extends heartfelt thanks to Chef Aynur, the Özdemir family for opening their home, and all the amazing volunteers who helped make this wonderful night possible. Events like Street Eats & Beats are a reminder of why the Turkish Festival means so much! It's not just about celebrating the culture, but the people who keep that culture alive, one song, one smile, and one delicious bite at a time.



**FROM SIZZLING KOKOREÇ TO CLASSIC TURKISH TUNES, THE FUNDRAISER  
TURNED A RAINY NIGHT INTO A FEAST OF JOY AND TOGETHERNESS.**





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# DC TURKISH FESTIVAL 2025: THE FESTIVAL CONNECTS EAST AND WEST

**A DAY IN TÜRKIYE** WHERE CULTURE, FLAVOR AND FRIENDSHIP MEET IN D.C.  
THE 23RD ANNUAL TURKISH FESTIVAL TRANSFORMED PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE INTO A VIBRANT CELEBRATION OF MUSIC, DANCE, AND SHARED HERITAGE.

BY DEMET CABBAR



On October 19, 2025, sunshine, songs, and the spirit of Türkiye filled the streets of Washington, D.C.

Under clear blue skies and the warmth of a perfect fall Sunday, Pennsylvania Avenue transformed once again into a lively slice of Türkiye for the 23rd Annual Turkish Festival, themed *“A Day in Türkiye: Taste, Dance, Discover.”* Washingtonians flowed into the festival grounds throughout the day, drawn by the irresistible aromas of Turkish cuisine, the rhythms of Anatolian rock, and the joyful spirit that has made this celebration a D.C. favorite for over two decades. The festival – organized by the American-Turkish Association of Washington, D.C. (ATA-DC) – was part of the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual

Turkish Cultural Heritage Month (THM), officially proclaimed by Mayor Muriel Bowser. With the help of 104 volunteers, the festival ran seamlessly, powered by dedication, teamwork, and community pride. “You could feel the energy in every corner – from the sizzling kebabs to the dance stage,” said Sevtap Schreffler, President of ATA-DC. “This festival is more than a celebration; it’s a connection between cultures. Seeing so many people come together to enjoy and discover Türkiye makes all the hard work worthwhile. I congratulate the Board of Directors for this achievement.”





## A Feast for the Senses

The festival's food court was a feast in every sense – the largest display of authentic Turkish cuisine in the United States. From freshly grilled kebabs and buttery böreks to syrup-drenched baklava and hand-rolled gözleme, every dish transported visitors straight to the streets of Istanbul or the villages of Anatolia. Sweet lovers were spoiled for choice – sampling Turkish delights, crispy tulumba pastries, and simit, the iconic sesame-crust bread ring. At the Turkish Tea and Coffee Houses, guests lingered over steaming cups of strong tea and rich, foamy Turkish coffee, while fortune tellers read patterns from the coffee grounds – a cherished Turkish tradition. “It’s like being back home in Istanbul, but with the Capitol as your backdrop,” said one attendee with a smile, holding a plate of döner and a cup of tea.”

## Music, Dance, and the Rhythm of Togetherness

If there was one thing that defined this year’s festival, it was the energy – and no one embodied it better than *Necati and Saykolar*, the beloved Anatolian rock band that headlined the stage. Their powerful performance electrified Pennsylvania Avenue, drawing huge crowds and echoing down the National Mall. The band’s energy was contagious. “We absolutely loved performing in front of the U.S. Capitol,” said frontman Necati Karadayi. “The energy of the Washington audience was incredible – we felt right at home. We would love to come back and play again!”



Adding to the festival’s dynamism, MV Studio Dance Ensemble from New York captivated the crowd with a stunning blend of modern and traditional Turkish choreography, showcasing the diversity and creativity of Türkiye’s dance culture. The stage also became a platform for underrepresented cultural groups, including performers from the Crimean Tatar and Uyghur communities. Their emotional performances touched hearts and reminded audiences of Türkiye’s deep historical and ethnic connections across Central Asia and beyond. “Seeing them represented was moving and meaningful,” said one visitor. “It showed how this festival honors diversity within Turkish culture itself.”

As always, the Kardelen Turkish Dance Ensemble brought the crowd to its feet – both with their vibrant stage performances and their impromptu dances with festivalgoers on the plaza. Hand in hand, hundreds joined in a spontaneous celebration of





unity and joy. One of the day's biggest highlights was the "Damat Halayı" workshop, where people of all ages learned and danced the traditional groom's dance together. The crowd erupted in excitement as the music shifted to "Erik Dalı," a beloved Turkish tune that turned the avenue into a massive open-air dance floor. Turks, Americans, and visitors from all backgrounds joined hands and danced in unison – a living symbol of harmony in the heart of the nation's capital. "Moments like this remind us how music and dance unite us beyond language or borders," said one smiling participant.

### **Celebrating Heritage and Culture**

Beyond the performances, the Cultural Tent offered an immersive exploration of Türkiye's history and cultural depth. Visitors discovered Türkiye's rich connections to Azeris, Uyghurs, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Sephardic Jews, and Crimean Tatars, learning about the shared traditions, languages, and artistry that link these communities. Artisans demonstrated Ebru (Turkish paper marbling), mesmerizing onlookers with the transformation of swirling paint and water into delicate, colorful patterns. Displays of handwoven textiles, carpets, ceramics, and jewelry drew admiration, offering a window into the creativity and craftsmanship that define Turkish art.

Meanwhile, the Kids' Tent was one of the busiest and most joyful corners of the festival. Our youngest visitors dove into hands-on activities, face painting, and cultural crafts – learning while having fun. "There was never a dull moment," said Sema Yelken, the Kids' Tent organizer. "We love seeing our young visitors enjoying themselves – their excitement brings an extra spark to the festival every year."

### **Empowering the Next Generation**

A special highlight of this year's festival was the participation of ATA-DC's Young Cultural Ambassador (YCA) Program, the association's high school leadership initiative that empowers students through volunteerism, cultural exchange, and diplomacy. This year, 50 YCAs proudly served as volunteers throughout the event – managing tents, supporting logistics, and engaging with visitors. "It was inspiring to see our YCAs take on real responsibilities and represent the Turkish-American community with such confidence," said Aylin Gecener. "They are the future leaders of Turkish-American engagement, and the festival gives them a chance to lead by example."





## A Beloved Washington Tradition

The Turkish Festival has been voted “Best Festival” and “Best Cultural Festival” by Washington City Paper readers for 13 years running and continues to attract over 20,000 visitors annually. “For 23 years, we’ve proudly hosted the Turkish Festival on Pennsylvania Avenue, inviting Washingtonians to taste, dance, and discover Türkiye,” said Özge Övün Sert, Chair of the Festival Committee. “This year was extra special – from Necati & Saykolar’s performance to the energy of the crowd, the sense of togetherness was unforgettable.”

As the sun set behind the Capitol and the final notes faded, one thing was clear: the spirit of Türkiye once again lit up the heart of Washington, D.C. – with warmth, rhythm, and joy that will last long after the music stopped. ■





☀ **ATA-DC VOLUNTEERS AND BOARD MEMBERS WORKED  
TIRELESSLY TO ENSURE A SEAMLESS, WELL-ORGANIZED FESTIVAL.** ☀





☀ **DC TURKISH FESTIVAL, VOTED “BEST FESTIVAL” BY WASHINGTON CITY PAPER READERS, CONTINUES TO ATTRACT OVER 20,000 VISITORS.** ☀







# STARLINE SHADES

## SHADING SYSTEMS





# CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF ATA-DC



## A LEGACY OF COMMUNITY, CULTURE, AND CONNECTION

BY ELVAN RAMAZANOGLUARI

### The Beginning: A Vision for Community (1965)

In April 1965, a close-knit group of Turkish professionals living in the Washington, D.C. area came together with a simple but powerful idea, to form an organization where Turks could gather, share their culture, and create a sense of home away from home. What began as informal meetings in living rooms eventually grew into what we now proudly known as the American Turkish Association of Washington, D.C. (ATA-DC).

The early years of ATA-DC were shaped by a small but passionate community, many of whom were medical doctors and engineers. The Association established its first bylaws and leadership under Dr. Zeki Erim as President, Dr. Rıza Sarıoğlu as Vice President, and Dogan Korgan as Secretary. As membership gradually expanded, social gatherings moved from private homes to hotels and public venues, with the Turkish Embassy always keeping its doors open to support the

growing community. Early presidents such as Galip Arkılıç and Ragıp Damar helped strengthen the organization's foundation, while the ATA News publication, edited by George Haig (and earlier by William Ali), became an important bridge for sharing news and cultural updates within the Turkish-American community.

### Expanding Horizons: Building Bridges in the 1980s

During the 1980s, under the presidency of Engin Holmstrom (1983–1989), ATA-DC saw a period of revitalization and growth. The organization became an active hub for both Turks and Americans, nearly 40% of its members at the time were American-born, reflecting ATA-DC's inclusive spirit and cross-cultural mission. With the encouragement of then-Ambassador Şükrü Elekdağ, ATA-DC expanded its community



outreach through educational programs, conferences, and participation in major local events such as the Rock Creek Festival and Fourth of July Parades.

### **A New Generation of Leadership: The 1990s**

The 1990s marked another important phase in ATA-DC's evolution, as a younger generation of Turkish Americans began to take on leadership roles. Tolga Çubukçu (1993–1997) became involved with the association after being encouraged by his friend Armağan Sanver around 1990, following a gathering of Robert College alumni he had hosted. His presidency represented a bridge between the earlier, tightly knit Turkish community and a newer, more diverse generation of members and volunteers. During his term, ATA-DC continued to strengthen its social and cultural footprint across the D.C. region, expanding community events and outreach while maintaining the association's strong network of Turkish and American friends and supporters. This period laid the groundwork for many of the programs and traditions that would flourish in the decades to come with the presidencies of Hulya Polat, Pelin Aylangan and following young leaders such as Demet Cabbar, Gizem Salcigil White and Hande Ayan.

### **Education and Cultural Diplomacy: The 2000s**

Late 90s through the early 2000s, ATA-DC entered a new era of educational and cultural engagement. Relaunching of the Atatürk School was one of these key initiatives. The school



offered Turkish language classes for both children and adults, helping the community stay connected to their language and heritage. For children, the school also provided folk dance, chorus, and expression activities, creating opportunities for creativity and cultural exploration. These programs allowed students not only to learn the language, but also to engage with Turkish traditions in a hands-on and enjoyable way. The Atatürk School became a vibrant hub for both education and cultural enrichment in the community.

One of the most impactful initiatives was the Teacher's Workshop, a day-long seminar hosted at the Turkish Embassy and the World Bank, inviting American educators to learn about Türkiye through lectures, documentaries, and even sponsored trips. This program was originally pioneered by Engin Holmstrom in 80s and in the upcoming years, ATA-DC's long-term board member Feriha İştar led the program. Many American high school and middle school teachers actively participated in this program and learned about Türkiye's history, culture, and even cuisine. At the end of the program, a number of teachers were awarded fully paid trips to Türkiye.



Teacher's Workshop at the Turkish Embassy



## **A Festival of Pride: The Growth of a Signature Event**

Pelin Aylangan (2005–2007) ushered in another defining chapter in ATA-DC's history, the Turkish Festival. Originally launched by Fatih Çulha of TURCO, the festival was brought under ATA-DC's organization and grew into the association's signature annual event.

What began as a modest cultural fair has blossomed into one of the largest Turkish-American celebrations in the U.S. Proudly run by volunteers and supported by community sponsors, the Turkish Festival of Washington, D.C. just celebrated its 23rd year, attracting nearly 25,000 visitors in 2025. The festival stands today as an important symbol of cultural unity, creativity, and community spirit.

**“THROUGH THE  
REMARKABLE GROWTH  
OF THE ANNUAL D.C.  
TURKISH FESTIVAL,  
ATA-DC’S REACH AND  
INFLUENCE CONTINUE  
TO EXPAND AND  
ATTAIN NEW HEIGHTS.”**

**- Pelin Aylangan**

## **Innovation & Outreach: New Programs for New Generation**

Building on this momentum, Demet Cabbar (2007–2013) launched the ATA-DC Professional Networking Hour, a monthly gathering that continues to keep Turkish American professionals connected across the



**Turkish-American leaders worked hard to found cultural associations in 60s & 70s**





## A Dream Realized: ATA-DC House (2024–Present)

In October 2024, ATA-DC reached a long-held milestone under the presidency of Sevtap Schreffler (2022–present), the purchase of the ATA-DC House, a permanent home for the organization and a symbol of six decades of perseverance, service, and unity.

Today, the Atatürk School holds its classes there, and the space has become an active hub for cultural events, seminars, and community gatherings, a true testament to the organization's enduring mission. ATA-DC also just celebrated its first anniversary as a recognized nonprofit in the state of Virginia, marking another important step in its growth and official recognition.

## Looking Ahead: 60 Years of Legacy and Leadership

For sixty years, ATA-DC has stood as a bridge between Türkiye and the United States, a volunteer-driven community that celebrates heritage, fosters friendship, and inspires the next generation to carry the torch forward.

From living-room meetings to the Turkish Festival on Pennsylvania Avenue, the story of ATA-DC is one of dedication, cultural pride, and lasting impact, and it continues to be written with every event, every volunteer, and every new member who joins this remarkable journey. ■

D.C. metropolitan area. Under her leadership, ATA-DC also launched the first Turkish Heritage Month in 2012, a milestone that has since become an annual celebration every October. Each year, ATA-DC receives proclamations from the Mayor of Washington, D.C., and neighboring city leaders, recognizing Turkish Heritage Month and honoring the Turkish-American community. Throughout the month, ATA-DC hosts a wide range of cultural events, from Turkish Film Festivals, often featuring directors and producers in post-screening panels, to Turkish tea and coffee workshops, Red and White parties, Turkish food nights, and Restaurant Week. These events showcase the richness of Turkish culture, cuisine, and art while strengthening the bond between communities in the D.C. area.

Later, under Gizem Salcigil White's leadership, ATA-DC launched the Young Cultural Ambassadors Program (YCAP) in 2017. This initiative engages high school students from the D.C.-Maryland-Virginia area through cultural and educational activities promoting volunteerism, leadership, and cross-cultural understanding. Transitioning to a hybrid format in 2020, YCAP expanded participation and curriculum, helping over 100 students gain hands-on experience, pursue internships, and secure admission to top colleges.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, ATA-DC, under Sitki Kazanci, quickly adapted by moving its programming online, hosting virtual panels, cultural events, and seminars to keep the community connected and engaged through challenging times of the quarantine.



The new ATA-DC House marks an exciting chapter in the history of Turkish-American associations in the U.S.





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# A JOURNEY FROM TECH TO CREATIVITY

BY SEVTAP SCHREFFLER

In an age where technology often distances us from our sense of self, Turkish-American entrepreneur Tolga Kelebek found a way to bring humanity back into the digital realm. From Istanbul to Washington, D.C., his journey spans continents, careers, and creative awakenings – culminating in Scio Art, an innovative venture that transforms the human iris into personalized and vigorous works of art. In this inspiring conversation with ATANews, Tolga Kelebek shares how his Turkish roots, entrepreneurial spirit, and belief in individuality led him to merge science, technology, and art into a single vision of beauty and connection.

*Can you tell us a bit about your journey—from Türkiye to founding Scio-Art in the U.S.?*

I was born and raised in Istanbul, Türkiye, where I completed my studies at Istanbul University before moving to the United States in 1996 to pursue my MBA at Old Dominion University. After graduating in 1999, I began my professional journey in the medical manufacturing field and later transitioned into IT consulting, where I built a long and successful career. In 2009, I founded my own IT systems consulting company – Logix Technology Solutions, providing enterprise software solutions to businesses across the U.S. Over the years, my passion for technology and innovation evolved into something more creative, leading me to establish Scio Art in 2024. Scio Art represents the fusion of art, technology, and individuality transforming the human iris into a personalized artwork that connects science and emotion in a truly unique way.

*What inspired you to start Scio-Art? Was there a specific moment that sparked the idea?*

The inspiration for Scio Art came from a conversation with my business partner from Ukraine, who shared how iris photography was becoming a creative trend across Europe. The idea instantly captivated me. The concept of turning something as personal and unique as the human iris into a work of art resonated deeply. I've always been fascinated by



the intersection of technology and human individuality, and this concept brought both together beautifully. I realized that with the right equipment, artistic vision, and innovative approach, we could create something truly meaningful: personalized art born from one's own biology. That spark of curiosity quickly evolved into Scio Art, where technology meets emotion and individuality becomes art.

*Has your Turkish heritage influenced your work as an artist or business owner and if yes can you explain how?*

Absolutely! My Turkish heritage has had a profound influence on both my creative vision and business philosophy. Growing up in Türkiye exposed me to a rich blend of history, art, and





symbolism. This cultural depth shaped my appreciation for individuality and beauty; values that are central to Scio Art. In business, Turkish culture and traditions taught me resilience, adaptability, and the importance of human connection; qualities essential for entrepreneurship in such a global environment. Even though I've lived most of my life in the U.S., I carry my Turkish roots proudly; they remind me to infuse every project with authenticity, emotion, and meaning; blending Eastern creativity with Western innovation.

*What is the mission or philosophy behind Scio-Art?*

The mission of Scio Art is to celebrate individuality by transforming the most unique part of every person: the iris, into a form of personalized art. Our philosophy is built on the belief that art and technology can work together to reveal the deeper essence of who we are. Each iris tells a story, a visual signature that reflects identity, emotion, and even character. Through advanced imaging and creative design, we bring that story to life in a way that is both scientifically fascinating and emotionally meaningful. Scio Art is not just about creating beautiful visuals; it's about helping people see themselves as

art – a perfect harmony between nature, technology, and self-expression.

*What kind of work does Scio-Art do, and who is your typical audience or client?*

Scio Art specializes in transforming high-resolution iris photographs into stunning pieces of personalized artwork. Using advanced imaging technology, digital enhancement, and creative design, we capture the intricate beauty of each person's eye and turn it into custom prints, jewelry, and digital art. Every piece is unique, no two irises are alike, making each creation a deeply personal expression of identity. Our typical clients are individuals and couples who appreciate meaningful, innovative art; people who want to celebrate their uniqueness or share it as a memorable gift. We also attract art lovers, families, and even corporate clients looking for creative experiences that blend emotion, technology, and self-discovery.

*What has it been like to run a business as a Turkish entrepreneur in the U.S.?*

Running a business as a Turkish entrepreneur in the U.S. has been both a challenging and deeply rewarding experience. Coming from a different culture taught me the value of perseverance, adaptability, and building strong relationships;





qualities that have been essential in navigating the competitive American business landscape. The U.S. offers incredible opportunities for those who are willing to work hard and innovate, and I've always felt inspired by its entrepreneurial spirit. At the same time, my Turkish background gives me a unique perspective; blending creativity, warmth, and a people-centered approach with American efficiency and business structure. Living and working in the Washington, D.C. area, I feel proud to contribute to the community and to bridge cultures through creativity and innovation.

*What advice would you give to other Turkish-Americans or young creatives who want to start their own business?*

My advice to Turkish-Americans and young creatives is simple: believe in your vision, stay persistent, and never stop learning. The U.S. is a country that rewards innovation, but success doesn't come overnight; it requires patience, adaptability and resilience. Embrace your cultural background as a strength; it gives you a unique perspective that can set you apart in any field. Surround yourself with people who share your values, seek mentors who can guide you, and don't be afraid to take calculated risks. Challenges will come, but each one will teach you something invaluable. Most importantly, focus on creating real value; whether through art, technology, or business, and your work will naturally find its audience and purpose.

*How do you see the relationship between creativity and entrepreneurship in your own work?*

For me, creativity and entrepreneurship are inseparable. They feed and strengthen each other. Every successful business begins with a creative idea, but creativity doesn't stop there; it continues through every stage of building, adapting, and growing that idea. In my own work, I approach business challenges the same way an artist approaches a blank canvas, with curiosity, experimentation, and imagination. Scio Art, for example, was born from merging artistic vision with technological innovation, transforming something deeply personal into a tangible experience. I also believe that art is one of the most powerful bridges between cultures because it speaks a universal language that goes beyond words, politics, or geography, and through Scio Art, I see how creativity can connect people from completely different backgrounds on an emotional level.



*What's next for Scio-Art? Are there any upcoming projects or goals you'd like to share?*

The next stage for Scio Art is focused on nationwide expansion and international growth, as we continue to bring our unique concept of personalized iris art to new cities across the United States and beyond. One of our most meaningful new initiatives is the Scio Art Investor Visa Franchise Program, designed specifically to support aspiring Turkish entrepreneurs who dream of starting a business and building a new life in the U.S. Through this turnkey program, participants can acquire and operate their own Scio Art franchise, fully supported by our experienced team. In collaboration with our immigration lawyer partners, we help applicants and their families smoothly navigate the E-2 investor visa process, enabling them to relocate to the United States with confidence, own a running business, and integrate into their new community. This program is more than a business opportunity, it's a bridge for talented and ambitious individuals to join a growing creative movement that merges art, technology, and individuality. We invite anyone interested in opening a Scio Art branch or learning more about the investor visa franchise opportunity to contact us through our website, [www.scio-art.com](http://www.scio-art.com), or social media channels on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and LinkedIn. ■



ATA-DC's

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# YEARS OF LEGACY

## ATAA: INFORMS AND EMPOWERS COMMUNITIES



BY SELIM ERHAN

Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA), stands as a unifying umbrella organization for Turkish American associations across North America and beyond. Representing over 50 local chapters, where its leadership is democratically elected, largest Turkish American membership organization in the United States. Established in 1979 to fight defamation and attacks on Turkish Americans, ATAA has evolved to be the most influential grassroots umbrella organization for the Turkish American community in the United States.

ATAA's main mission is to create cohesion and cooperation between the social and cultural Turkish American non-profit organizations around the United States to establish an informed national Turkish American community that can help foster the United States – Türkiye relations and take an active part in promoting a balanced and truthful image of Türkiye and its people in the United States. As a non-faith organization, ATAA is open to people of diverse backgrounds.







**ATAA Headquarters in Alexandria, VA**

ATAA is governed by the Board of Directors with executive responsibility and a Board of Trustees that provides financial guidance and oversight. ATAA is a tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that relies on membership dues and donations.

Assembly of Turkish American Associations is thus a very powerful network where ideas, event planning, resources, economic and cultural connections are shared, discussed and actions are supported. Today ATAA communicates through ATAA USA Magazine, WhatsApp groups, webinars, an annual conference. Web based programs that align with the United Nations' sustainability goals where our participating youth members can reference the programs in their resumes. Youth programs connect Turkish-American youth from the US, Canada, Türkiye and reaches out to all the Turcic Nations. ATAA leads, supports, and participates in regional cultural events ranging from Turkish Coffee Day, movie festivals, cultural festivals, Republic Day balls and provides connections to such cultural events that are held in many states.

ATAA library is a rich resource for anyone that wants to learn more about current issues that are related to other ethnic groups and provides guidance with recorded webinars, books, articles and expert opinions. ATAA also offers connections to speakers on a variety of social, historical and political topics, legal help from the Turkish Antidefamation Organizations (TADA), and Political Action Committees (PACs). Turks have one of the richest history,

language and cultural traditions in the world that stretches back over more than 5000 years. We are proud to share this vast accumulated knowledge that shapes our relations, hospitality, cuisine, lifestyles, and arts. Activities are done mostly in groups of like-minded committee members, which makes it enjoyable, satisfying and rewarding.

In short ATAA is an exchange and empowerment network that helps Turkish-Americans to form strong US-Turkish relations and take an active part in promoting a balanced and truthful picture of Türkiye in the US. This is one half of a very important role. The second half falls on each person who will use this network to take action to promote peace, education and cooperation that will sustain our community and our relations with the rest of the world, build a strong and lasting future for ourselves, our children and for the future generations.

With continuous action, bold ideas, and the energy of our youth, ATAA remains strong, relevant, and unstoppable – a network that empowers us to be heard and make a difference worldwide. ■



**ATAA Conference 2025 at The Westin Crystal City, Arlington, VA**



## FINDING STRENGTH AND IDENTITY IN GROWING UP TURKISH AMERICAN

***A second-generation Turkish American teen's journey of belonging, pride, and rediscovery.***

BY DURU SERT



**G**rowing up as a second-generation Turkish American means learning to live in two worlds at once – and finding a way to make both feel like home. Over the years, I've come to see how being part of more than one culture doesn't divide us; it makes us whole. It shapes how we think, how we connect with others, and how we understand who we are. For me, holding onto my Turkish roots while growing up in the U.S. has been a journey of learning, pride, and rediscovery. It hasn't always been easy, but it's something that has made me stronger and more open-minded. Embracing both sides of my identity has helped me grow into someone who can carry two cultures with love – one in each hand, and both in my heart.

My relationship with being Turkish-American has had its ups and downs as I was growing up. However, one thing never

changed: the importance it had to me. My culture, language, and background have always been something I hold dear in my heart. It gives me a sense of belonging and continues to teach me more about who I am. As a result of being raised by grandparents who couldn't speak English, my first language was Turkish despite being born in America. I could speak and write more fluently at the age of 4 than I can now at 16. I was never taught English until preschool where I had to learn for myself through listening to the American kids and adults around me. It was a hard time for younger me, but it allowed me to grow into the bilingual girl I am today.

Elementary school also put a toll on my love and enthusiasm for my background. I went into elementary school in 2014, and I was comfortable with who I was; I loved my culture and spoke my native language Turkish on a daily basis at home.



However, Türkiye was not a country that most kids knew back then. I still have vivid memories of telling the other kids that I was from “Turkey” and getting laughter and jokes in return. At some point, I had become conditioned to tell the kids that they can’t laugh before I actually told them where I am from. Even through the jokes and laughter, I was proud of who I was and where I came from. When my brother entered elementary school, I worried he would face the same ridicule I did for something he should be proud of. It was a welcome surprise when I learned that times had changed and he did not face the same mockery I had to endure.

After elementary school, through my middle and high school years, I fell in love with my culture all over again. I hated the fact that quarantine had distanced me from the language and place that felt like home. I worked hard during the pandemic and the years after to retain my Turkish and stay fluent while everything around me was English.

**“MY CULTURE, LANGUAGE, AND BACKGROUND HAVE ALWAYS BEEN SOMETHING I HOLD DEAR IN MY HEART. IT GIVES ME A SENSE OF BELONGING AND CONTINUES TO TEACH ME MORE ABOUT WHO I AM.”**

My connection to being Turkish American has strengthened and only gets stronger every year. The summers I get to spend in Türkiye, as well as volunteering at the Turkish Festival and other ATA-DC events, help me stay connected to the culture and my background. Today, I speak Turkish when I can and teach those around me. I have learned to enjoy and be proud of my background and embrace it in my everyday life. I hope to be able to continue to teach people about my family’s home country and its beautiful land, culture, people and language throughout my life.

Looking back, I’ve realized that being Turkish American is one of the best parts of who I am. It’s not always simple, but it’s something I’ve learned to love more with every passing year. My culture connects me to my family, my community, and a part of the world that will always feel like home. I’m proud to share it with others and to keep learning from it as I grow. Carrying two cultures isn’t a burden. It’s a beautiful gift that reminds me every day that I belong to something bigger than myself. ■





## ATATÜRK SCHOOL STARTED THE NEW YEAR WITH JOY AND EXCITEMENT



Our 2025-2026 school year at ATA-DC Atatürk School has officially begun, and excitement is in the air! With more than 45 students enrolled, our program continues to be incredibly popular in the community. We are thrilled to welcome everyone to our new building in Falls Church, VA, where students will engage in vibrant educational and cultural activities. Each classroom honors a prominent figure in Turkish heritage, and singing the Turkish national anthem brings us together with pride. Join us as we celebrate Turkish national holidays and foster a deep appreciation for Turkish language and culture throughout the year.

This year, Atatürk School welcomes its new principal and board member, Sema Yelken. We, the members of the Board of Directors, are enthusiastic about another school year filled with growth, creativity, and cultural pride. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the families who have enrolled their children to learn about Turkish language, culture, and history. Our dedicated teachers remain committed to ensuring that each student receives the highest quality education and a truly enriching experience.

### ***An Overview of Ataturk School:***

The ATA-DC Atatürk School is dedicated to teaching children about Turkish language, history, and culture. Serving the community since 1980, this year the school moved into its own building in Falls Church, VA. The classrooms are named after prominent figures in Turkish heritage: Atatürk, Hacivat & Karagoz, Sabiha Gokcen, and Baris Manco. Singing the Turkish national anthem promotes unity and pride among students and staff.

The school celebrates Turkish national holidays, including October 29 Republic Day, November 10 Commemoration of Atatürk, and April 23 Sovereignty and Children's Day festivities. The academic year is Semester 1 from September 7th to December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025, and Semester 2 from January 4<sup>th</sup> to May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2026.

By fostering appreciation for Turkish language and culture, ATA-DC Atatürk School helps students become proud, culturally-aware individuals.



### ATA-DC LAUNCHES ITS 2025–26 YOUNG CULTURAL AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

ATA-DC has successfully launched its 2025–2026 Young Cultural Ambassador (YCA) Program this October with an impressive 50 high school students – the largest cohort to date.

The YCA Program is ATA-DC's youth leadership initiative designed to empower high school students across the DMV region through volunteerism, cultural diplomacy, and civic engagement. Over the course of the academic year, participants engage in a rigorous and enriching experience that helps them:

- Strengthen their communication and cultural diplomacy skills;
- Build confidence and leadership capacity;
- Learn from professionals and experts representing diverse fields;
- Understand the importance of public service by engaging with local and federal elected officials;
- Receive recognition on ATA-DC and Turkish Festival platforms, along with certificates of appreciation and community service hours; and
- Access internship opportunities and continue developing their personal and professional growth.

Since its inception, over 150 high school students have benefited from the YCA Program. “We are delighted to see such growing enthusiasm from high schoolers who are eager to serve our community while strengthening their leadership skills,” said Sevtap Schreffler, President of ATA-DC. Students who attended YCAP this year also volunteered for Turkish Festival 2025.





# SIGN UP TO BECOME A MEMBER TODAY

Members of ATA-DC enjoy exclusive discounts for numerous ATA-DC and partner events, including The Atatürk School and the Turkish Republic Day Ball. Some events are complimentary for our members.

As a new initiative, ATA-DC provides a special membership to [Working Advantage](#) website. Working Advantage is the leading Corporate Discount Program provider, offering exclusive discounts and special offers on products, services and experiences you need and love. Save big on theme parks, attractions, hotels, rental cars, concerts, sports, live events, electronics, appliances, apparel, gift cards, movie tickets and much more. Please reach out to us to get the passcode for your membership.

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