



AMERICAN TURKISH
ASSOCIATION OF
WASHINGTON DC

JANUARY 2026
ISSUE 8

ALPEREN ŞENGÜN

THE RISE OF A TURKISH STAR

THE "MAGIC FLUTE"

INTERVIEW WITH ŞEFİKA KUTLUER

A YEAR IN REVIEW, A VISION AHEAD

REFLECTING ON 2025

ATA *News*

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PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Dear Friends,

As we turn the page to a new year, it is natural to look back at the many events that filled our calendar. Festivals, celebrations, workshops, concerts, and youth programs all stand out as memorable moments. Yet what stays with me most is not the number of events we held, but the meaning behind them. Each gathering—whether a large festival on Pennsylvania Avenue or a small workshop at the ATA-DC House—represents something deeper than a date on the calendar. These moments create spaces where culture is shared, friendships are formed, and identities are affirmed. They remind us who we are, where we come from, and why community matters.

Community is not built by events alone; it is built when people show up for one another. It is built when volunteers give their time, when families bring their children to learn and celebrate together, when young people step forward to lead, and when longtime members continue to support and guide the next generation. Every smile exchanged, every conversation started, and every helping hand extended strengthens the fabric of our community. One of the most powerful aspects of ATA-DC is the way it brings generations together. At our events, you will see children learning about their heritage, teenagers discovering their voices, and adults reconnecting with traditions they grew up with. This continuity across generations is essential. It ensures that our culture is not only preserved, but lived, experienced, and passed on with pride.

These moments also create a sense of belonging. For many, ATA-DC is where friendships begin, where newcomers feel welcomed, and where familiar faces feel like family. It is where we celebrate joyful milestones together and where we support one another through challenges. That sense of connection is at the heart of everything we do. While much of our work is visible through events and programs, what truly sustains our community is the shared commitment behind them. It is the understanding that this association belongs to all of us and that its strength comes from collective care and participation. Every contribution—large or small—helps create an environment where people feel valued and included.

As we move forward, I hope we continue to see each gathering not just as an event to attend, but as an opportunity to connect, to listen, and to build something lasting together. The true success of ATA-DC is measured not only by what we organize, but by the relationships we nurture and the sense of home we create for one another. Thank you for being part of these moments and for helping turn them into meaningful memories that carry us forward.

With warm regards,



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 ATANews readers,

Stepping into a new year, I find myself reflecting not only on the pages of this magazine, but on the people, moments, and silent efforts behind them. Editing this issue of ATANews felt less like assembling articles and more like listening to the many voices that make up our community, and trying to honor them on paper.

2025 was a year filled with milestones. Some were visible and celebratory: a huge festival that filled Pennsylvania Avenue with color and music, concerts that took us back to our homeland, youngsters stepping confidently into leadership roles. Others were quieter but just as meaningful: conversations behind the scenes, long volunteer hours, and the commitment of individuals who believe that community is something you actively build, not something you take for granted.

What continues to inspire me is how deeply connected these moments are. A teenager attending Cultural Ambassadors Program today may be the young leader shaping civic conversations tomorrow. A cultural evening at ATA-DC House becomes more than an event—it becomes a memory, a sense of belonging, a reminder that we are not alone in carrying our heritage forward. Through the pages of ATANews, we try to capture these moments and connections, knowing that stories have a unique power to bind generations together.

Philip Meyer once said, *“Journalism is the first rough draft of history.”* That idea resonates deeply with the purpose of ATANews. Each issue is our community’s way of recording not only what happened, but why it mattered. Long after the events conclude and the celebrations end, these pages remain as a living archive—documenting who we were, what we valued, and how we showed up for one another. It is both a privilege and a responsibility to help shape that record with care, accuracy, and pride. This magazine exists because of a collective belief that our stories matter and our community thrives when people feel seen and heard. I am deeply grateful to our contributors, volunteers, readers, and supporters who make this possible. As we turn the page to a new year, my hope is that ATANews continues to be a space where our shared journey is recorded and passed on to new generations of Turkish Americans.

As winter settles in, I wish you warmth, good health, and comfort in the weeks ahead.

Best wishes as always,

Özge Övün-Sert

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ATA-DC SECRETARY GENERAL



VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION PARTY AFTER THE 23RD TURKISH FESTIVAL

ATA-DC hosted its annual Volunteer Appreciation Party on November 16 at its new location in Falls Church, bringing together over sixty attendees, including first-time volunteers who met ATA-DC this year. The event was organized to recognize and thank everyone who contributed to the success of this year's festival. Guests enjoyed a warm and friendly atmosphere, reconnecting with familiar faces while also forming new friendships.

The evening featured delicious Turkish dishes and finger foods, lively Turkish music, and even some dancing. As a small gesture of appreciation, guests received evil eye bead keychains, a symbol of good luck and protection, adding a thoughtful cultural touch to the celebration. Many attendees shared that it was a warm, genuine, and enjoyable gathering, and that celebrating in ATA-DC's new home made the evening even more special. Everyone left with positive energy, once again reflecting the strong sense of community that continues to grow within ATA-DC.



SEFIKA KUTLUER GAVE A MESMERIZING CONCERT AT THE ATA-DC HOUSE IN VA

After a long absence, Türkiye's distinguished State Artist Şefika Kutluer—beloved worldwide as the “Magic Flute”—returned to Washington, D.C., enchanting music lovers with two unforgettable concerts that beautifully blended elegance, emotion, and cultural pride.

Her first performance was held at the Turkish Ambassador's Residence, where members of the diplomatic corps, representatives of foreign missions, and distinguished guests gathered for an evening of refined artistry. With her signature warmth and lyrical mastery, Ms. Kutluer filled the residence with a captivating atmosphere, earning heartfelt applause and deep admiration from all in attendance.

Just days later, on December 13, Kutluer headlined the very first cultural music event at the newly opened ATA-DC House. Interest was overwhelming, with reservations filling quickly. As the audience listened in near silence, her expressive playing carried them from note to note, creating an intimate and unforgettable shared experience. The evening concluded on a joyful note with welcome news: Ms. Kutluer promised to return for another concert.

ATA - DC LEADERSHIP ATTENDS TRNC REPUBLIC DAY RECEPTION

The ATA-DC President and members of the Board of Directors attended a reception hosted by Ambassador Damla Güçlü of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in celebration of the 42nd Anniversary of the Proclamation of the TRNC. The commemorative event took place at the prestigious Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., bringing together community leaders and distinguished guests to honor this significant milestone in the history of the TRNC. The reception provided an opportunity to reflect on the enduring values and resilience of the Turkish Cypriot people, while strengthening ties within the broader Turkish communities. ATA-DC's participation underscored the organization's continued commitment to supporting cultural heritage, fostering diplomatic engagement, and standing in solidarity with the Turkish Cypriot community.



ATATÜRK SCHOOL STUDENTS PAID TRIBUTE TO THE FOUNDING FATHER

The founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was commemorated by the ATA-DC Atatürk School's teachers, students, and parents at the ATA-DC House. During the event, participants wore lapel photographs of Atatürk as a sign of honor and gratitude on the 87th anniversary of his passing. The commemoration began with the National Anthem, and followed by a minute of silence. Students then recited poems and delivered a presentation titled "A Letter to Atatürk," after which the School Principal addressed the audience. The ceremony concluded with students placing red carnations around Atatürk's bust—an enduring symbol of respect and remembrance in Turkish culture.

A SPECIAL VISIT FROM THE PAST PRESIDENT AND SECRETARY GEN.



Former ATA-DC President Pelin Aylangan and former Secretary Esra Özben recently visited the newly purchased ATA-DC House, marking a proud and meaningful milestone for the organization. As longtime supporters and advocates for education, they expressed deep admiration for the vision and dedication of the current Board of Directors in bringing this project to life. Inspired by the House's role as a cultural and educational hub, Pelin and Esra generously sponsored the new library. Their contribution reflects a shared belief in education, knowledge, and community connection. They also shared heartfelt wishes for ATA-DC's continued growth and success in its new home.



WORLD TURKIC LANGUAGE FAMILY DAY – PROCLAIMED BY UNESCO

Following the official decision by UNESCO to designate December 15 as World Turkic Language Family Day, a special celebration was held at the Turkish House in New York on December 4, 2025. The event was jointly organized by the Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA), the Turkish Women's League of America (TWLA), and the Turkish-American Community Empowerment Platform. Opening remarks were delivered by ATAA President Alev Wieland and TWLA President Berna Gürdal, followed by a keynote address from Ambassador Ahmet Yıldız, Permanent Representative of Türkiye to the United Nations. A video message from Prof. Dr. M. M. Öcal Oğuz, President of the UNESCO Turkish National Commission, highlighted the process that led to the declaration of this meaningful day.

The program featured academic presentations on the role of the Turkish language in Turkish pop music by Prof. Dr. Gregory Key and on the shared history of the Turkic language family by Dr. Feride Hatiboğlu. A youth panel discussing language choices and the balance between foreign words and linguistic harmony brought a contemporary perspective to the event. Cultural performances, including music, poetry, and traditional dances by various community groups, enriched the celebration.



YASEMIN SAKALLIOĞLU BRINGS HER HIT COMEDY SHOW TO D.C.

Renowned Turkish comedian Yasemin Sakallioğlu brought her widely acclaimed stand-up show, “Doğru Koca Nasıl Seçilir?” (How to Choose the Right Husband?), to the U.S. as part of her limited tour, concluding with a performance in Washington, D.C. on December 14, 2025, at the Lisner Auditorium. In the show, Sakallioğlu humorously examined family dynamics, male-female relationships, and their psychological effects, drawing inspiration from real-life experiences. Her sharp observations, memorable character portrayals, and candid personal stories resonated strongly with audiences, transforming everyday relationship struggles into shared laughter.

The performance blended stand-up comedy with theatrical elements, including surprise sketches and dance sequences featuring backstage performers, creating a dynamic and engaging experience. Sakallioğlu, who began her career on social media in 2014, has since broken new ground in Turkish comedy, becoming the first comedian to perform at Ülker Sports and Event Hall and the first female comedian to take the stage at Harbiye Open-Air Theatre. Her U.S. tour marked another milestone in her growing international success.



ATATÜRK'S LEGACY AND TURKISH CULTURE BEING TAUGHT IN FCPS

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) has adopted Benchmark Advance as its core Language Arts curriculum for grades K–6, starting in the 2024–2025 school year. This program builds knowledge through units that integrate social studies, science, and literature, ensuring students develop strong reading, writing, and language comprehension skills.

For the Turkish American community, this curriculum brings a special sense of pride. In the 6th-grade unit "Achievements of Ancient Cultures," the article "Reform and Change in Turkey" highlights how Atatürk's leadership founded the Republic of Türkiye, detailing his modernization of the alphabet, legal system, and women's right to vote. Furthermore, Nasreddin Hodja's story "Eat My Coat, Eat" is featured in the curriculum for multilingual learners. This content will be taught for the next five years, and parents can easily access these lessons when students bring their unit magazines home. It is truly exciting to see our heritage and Türkiye's foundational history taught in local classrooms. Seeing our homeland's journey to modernization and its legendary figures included in the curriculum is a milestone for our community, fostering a deep sense of belonging and cultural pride for our children.



THE “MARCH OF LOVE” CONCERT HONORS MEVLANA IN NEW YORK

On the evening of December 19, New York's Symphony Space was marked by an intercultural celebration of spirituality and music at the “March of Love” concert, honoring the 752nd anniversary of the passing of Mevlana. Hosted at the Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, the concert reflected Rumi's enduring themes of love, unity, and tolerance brought together Western classical music and Anatolian spiritual traditions.

Acclaimed conductor Gürer Aykal led the ensemble through a diverse program, opening with Mozart before transitioning into works inspired by Rumi's spiritual legacy. Two prominent Turkish artists stood at the heart of the evening. Pianist Can Çakmur, widely recognized for his interpretations of classical repertoire, delivered a refined and focused performance that highlighted both technical clarity and musical restraint. Renowned musician and composer Ömer Faruk Tekbilek added a spiritual dimension to the concert with his mastery of traditional instruments, blending modal Eastern sounds with orchestral textures.

The evening also featured whirling dervishes performing the traditional Sema ritual, adding a visual and spiritual dimension aligned with Rumi's teachings. The concert concluded with a standing ovation, underscoring the continued global relevance of Rumi's message through music and cultural dialogue.

DC IMPROV HOSTS TURKISH STAND-UP PERFORMER SARPER GÜVEN

Turkish stand-up comedian Sarper Güven brought his unique comedic voice to Improv DC on December 10, delivering a lively performance that explored marriage, jealousy, and the cultural contrasts between Turkish and American life. Born and raised in Türkiye and now based in the United States, Güven drew laughter with sharp observations and relatable personal stories that resonated with the diverse audience. The show featured special guest comedian Shekinah Garner, adding to the evening's energetic and humorous atmosphere.

Güven has steadily built his reputation on the U.S. comedy circuit by transforming real-life experiences into universal humor. Best known to many as a cast member of *90 Day Fiancé: The Other Way*, an American reality television series on TLC, he has leveraged his reality TV fame into a growing stand-up career, earning attention for his candid, high-energy sets. Audiences at Improv DC appreciated Güven's fresh perspective on everyday relationships and cultural quirks, underscoring laughter's power to bridge differences.



ISTANBUL AND ANTALYA SHINE ON THE 2025 MOST VISITED CITIES LIST



While cities like New York or Dubai often dominate the conversation, Türkiye has officially taken center stage. According to Euromonitor International's latest data, Istanbul surged to become the world's 2nd most-visited city with 23 million arrivals, surpassing hubs like London and Hong Kong.

At the same time, Antalya secured the 6th spot globally with 19.3 million arrivals, outranking favorites like Paris. Together, these jewels welcomed over 42 million international travelers in 2024, proving our homeland is a premier global destination. Istanbul's allure lies in its many layers of history, where ferries trace the Bosphorus and ancient bazaars sit steps away from modern galleries.

Meanwhile, Antalya captivates with its blend of resort ease and antiquity, from Hadrian's Gate to gorgeous turquoise bays of Mediterranean Sea. Beyond the resorts, mountain peaks rise sharply behind the city, a reminder of the landscapes that once shaped ancient Lycian settlements. For Turkish Americans, these rankings are a proud celebration of our homeland's status as a world leader in history, architecture, and culture.



TURKISH-AMERICAN DONORS GATHER AT FUNDRAISERS LED BY TAC-PAC

ATA-DC's President and Board Members recently joined a large group of Turkish Americans from Virginia and several other states to meet with newly elected Congressman James Walkinshaw (D-VA, 11th District) at Bistro Cacao near Capitol Hill. Congressman Walkinshaw was elected to fill the seat formerly held by Congressman Gerry Connolly, a longtime friend of Türkiye and a supporter of the Turkish-American community, who passed away after his cancer diagnosis. Congressman Walkinshaw represents a district with a significant Turkish-American population, many of whom actively participated in his recent special election campaign.

ATA-DC believes that respectful and informed engagement with elected officials plays an important role in helping the Turkish-American diaspora better understand how government works while also ensuring that our community's perspectives are heard. These conversations are part of ATA-DC's commitment to non-political, bipartisan "soft advocacy"

focused on education, dialogue, and relationship-building rather than partisan positions. In addition to the meeting with Congressman Walkinshaw, the group also met with Congressman Pat Harrigan (NC-10) and Congressman Zach Nunn (IA-3). During these meetings, participants discussed broad topics such as the economy, as well as specific concerns relevant to the district. These meetings reflect ATA-DC's ongoing efforts to encourage civic awareness, foster mutual understanding, and support constructive engagement across party lines for the benefit of the broader community.



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REFLECTING ON 2025 & SHAPING



BY SEVTAP SCHREFFLER

A Year of Culture, Community, and Connection at ATA-DC

From large-scale festivals on Pennsylvania Avenue to intimate cultural gatherings at our new permanent home, this year marked an important chapter in ATA-DC's journey. Thanks to the generous support of our sponsors, the tireless dedication of our volunteers, and the enthusiastic participation of our members and friends, ATA-DC experienced a year filled with meaningful celebrations, cultural pride, and community connection. The year's momentum began in winter and early spring and continued through the end of the year, weaving together culture, education, professional development, youth engagement, and social connection.

Honoring Women, Family, and Community

The year opened with a special "Come and See ATA-DC House" event on January 11, inviting members to visit our newly acquired home before renovations began. With a playful construction theme—complete with hard hats and hammers—members symbolically took the "first strike" on the walls, marking the beginning of an exciting new chapter for ATA-DC. Community connection continued on February 25 with a Connection Hour at Bistro Cacao, where members gathered over drinks and conversation to strengthen relationships, expand networks, and enjoy time together in a relaxed setting.

On March 8, ATA-DC hosted its signature International Women's Day celebration, honoring Turkish women leaders in STEM while supporting educational initiatives. Esteemed speakers Dr. Esmâ Akın (GWU Medical School), Dr. Hande Özdinler (Northwestern University), and Dr. Duygu Tosun-Turgut (UCSF) were recognized with ATA-DC's Annual Leadership Award for their groundbreaking work and leadership.

Continuing its commitment to education and professional dialogue, ATA-DC hosted a webinar on March 16 titled "Immigration and Trade in the U.S. – Immigration Policy and Its Long-Term Impacts." Led by attorneys Tolga Özek and Mert Arkan, the webinar explored U.S. immigration policy, long-term economic impacts, international trade, customs tariffs, trade agreements, and compliance, providing valuable insights for the community.

As summer approached, community spirit took center stage. On June 7, members traveled together to Connecticut for the Turkey–USA Match Day Bus Trip, sharing excitement, pride, and camaraderie. This was followed by the beloved Father's Day Picnic on June 15 at Quincy Park, where nearly one hundred community members of all ages gathered to celebrate family, enjoy Turkish cuisine, and strengthen community bonds under the summer sky.



Back to the '80s Nostalgia Fundraiser Event on June 1st

Preparing for the Festival: Fundraising and Togetherness

Behind every successful Turkish Festival lies months of preparation and heartfelt community support. On June 1, festival fundraising began with the Back to the '80s Nostalgia Fundraiser, graciously hosted by Özlem and Hüseyin Akkaya. This colorful, music-filled evening brought the community together for dancing, laughter, and shared memories—proving that fundraising can be both impactful and fun.

Another highlight was the lively Street Eats & Beats Fundraiser on September 27, hosted by Aynur and Mustafa Özdemir. Guests enjoyed music by the SeksenRock Band and memorable kokoreç prepared by Chef Aynur, all in support of ATA-DC's award-winning festival. 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. Events like these fundraisers are a good reminder of why the DC Turkish Festival means so much for our community!



ATA-DC's trip to Connecticut for the Turkey–USA Match



Dance workshop featuring Romani, Artvin Horon and Eastern Halay

Turkish Heritage Month: A Celebration of Legacy

October marked Turkish Heritage Month (THM), beginning on October 4 with a Kick-Off Brunch combined with ATA-DC's 60th Anniversary Celebration. Our community came together to mark three special milestones at this event – the kickoff of the 14th Turkish Heritage Month, ATA-DC's 60th Anniversary, and our 1st Anniversary as a Virginia non-profit at our new place in Falls Church, Va. At its core, this special gathering honored the organization's long-standing legacy while looking ahead to its future.

Cultural programming continued on October 11 with a Folk Dance Workshop led by renowned instructor Yeliz Dingler. Participants explored regional dances including Romani, Artvin Horon, and Eastern Halay, experiencing the energy and diversity of Turkish folk culture.

The following day, on October 12, guests gathered for a Turkish Coffee & Fortune Reading Workshop, where the history, rituals, and social traditions of Turkish coffee were shared in an engaging and intimate setting.

A Festival That Brings a City Together

The pinnacle of the year arrived on October 19, when Pennsylvania Avenue once again transformed into a vibrant celebration of Turkish culture during the 23rd Annual Turkish Festival. Welcoming over 20,000 visitors, the festival showcased Turkish music, dance, arts, crafts, and cuisine, standing as a proud symbol of cultural exchange and community pride.

Just weeks later, on November 1, the community gathered at the Washington Plaza Hotel to celebrate the 102nd Anniversary of the Republic of Türkiye. The elegant Republic Day Grand Ball brought together distinguished guests and community members for an evening of unity, reflection, and celebration, with live music by Selin Geçit filling the dance floor.



Members and guests gathered to celebrate ATA-DC's 60 year of legacy on October 4.

YCAP students in an online session with Alexandria Mayor Gaskins



Investing in Youth and Education

Youth education and leadership remained central to ATA-DC's mission throughout the year, with 45 students enrolled in Atatürk School and 50 students participating in the Young Cultural Ambassadors Program (YCAP). Atatürk School students proudly celebrated national milestones, including the 10 November Atatürk Commemoration Day and 29 October National Republic Day, through poems, songs, and shared remembrance. On November 23, students also honored their teachers, recognizing the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as Head Teacher of the National Schools.

YCAP students engaged with community leaders across various fields through a combination of online and in-person sessions. A highlight was the YCAP Civic Engagement Seminar on November 8, held at ATA-DC House, featuring Lydia Borland and Lincoln McCurdy, who shared valuable insights on leadership, civic participation, and Turkish-American relations. The year concluded with a joyful YCAP End-of-Year Potluck on December 14, organized by the students themselves.

A New Home for Culture

A defining milestone occurred on December 13, when ATA-DC hosted world-renowned flutist Şefika Kutluer for a special concert at ATA-DC House. This memorable evening marked the first cultural music event at ATA-DC's new permanent address, symbolizing a new era for the organization as a

cultural and community hub. We were honored to welcome our esteemed artist Şefika Kutluer –internationally known as “The Magic Flute”– for an unforgettable performance and cultural evening at the ATA-DC House.

The Heart of ATA-DC: Our Volunteers

Behind every successful event stands an extraordinary group of volunteers. On November 16, ATA-DC honored these dedicated individuals with a Volunteer Appreciation Evening, celebrating the passion, time, and commitment that make every program possible. The event celebrated and thanked all those who contributed to the success of ATA-DC's events and programs, bringing together volunteers in a warm and friendly atmosphere filled with reconnections and new friendships.

So Much More is Happening

While many of the events shared here are the ones our members and friends see and enjoy firsthand, there is also a great deal of meaningful work happening quietly in the background. These ongoing efforts help make our community experience smoother, stronger, and more connected. One of the most beloved examples is ATANews, our quarterly magazine. With every issue, we bring people together through



shared stories, celebrations, and a sense of belonging that extends well beyond our events. At the same time, we have been thoughtfully modernizing our website, making it a more welcoming, fun, and easy-to-use space where our members and friends can stay informed and connected to everything ATA-DC. Though these efforts may not always be visible, they are deeply rooted in our commitment to serve our community with care and heart.

IN 2025, ATA-DC HOUSE BECAME THE CENTER OF THE TURKISH-AMERICAN COMMUNITY WITH ITS COMPELLING EVENTS AND PROGRAMS. THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS WILL CONTINUE TO WORK TIRELESSLY TO SERVE AND UNITE THE COMMUNITY IN 2026.

With Gratitude and Looking Ahead

From our hearts to all sponsors, volunteers, supporters, participants, – thank you for being part of ATA-DC's story in 2025 and we'd love to see you with us in 2026 as well.

Your continued support allows us to build bridges, celebrate heritage, and create lasting memories. Looking ahead to 2026, we are excited for another inspiring year. Together, we aim to foster greater connection, inclusivity, and impact in the year ahead. We wish you and your loved ones a prosperous, fulfilling, and healthy and New Year. ■



DC Turkish Festival 2025 on October 19



The Board of Directors having a monthly meeting at the ATA-DC House



BASKETBALL
FOREVER



THE RISE OF A TURKISH STAR IN

ALPEREN ŞENGÜN

BY ÖZGE ÖVÜN SERT

The 2025–2026 NBA season marked a turning point not only for the Houston Rockets but also for Turkish basketball: Alperen Şengün—only a year after becoming the second Turkish player ever selected for the NBA All-Star Game—erupted into an unforeseeable force that shattered expectations, producing numbers that challenge and redefine the modern game. Once regarded as a promising European prospect, he has surged into the conversation as one of the league’s most dominant and versatile centers. For the Turkish American community, his rise has been a source of immense pride, proving that a young athlete shaped by Türkiye’s sporting culture can rise to global prominence in the world’s most competitive basketball league.

Şengün’s story, however, is not the typical NBA fairy tale. His journey is marked by quiet perseverance, intense discipline, and unique path as he once described in his interview with Fatih Altaylı. Unlike many American prospects groomed through high-profile prep programs, Şengün was overlooked in early European scouting circles during the NBA Draft process in 2021. Many teams admired his solid skill set but questioned whether



his unconventional style would translate to the NBA, and they hesitated. It was Houston Rockets that saw what others missed: a rare blend of creativity, basketball IQ and instinctive playmaking. Drafted 16th overall (via Oklahoma City), Şengün entered the league determined to prove he belonged here. Today, he has not only proved his worth – he has redefined what a modern pivot can be.



From Giresun to the World Stage: A Childhood That Built a Champion

Born in 2002 in Giresun, Şengün grew up as the youngest child in a modest and close-knit family. His father was a local fisherman, his mother a homemaker, and with an older sister 10 years his senior and a brother 8 years older, the family often struggled to make ends meet. His parents initially enrolled him in swimming, but Alperen was more captured by basketball—imitating his brother’s moves and spending hours practicing footwork that still defines his game today.

At age 12, he took a life-changing leap: moving away from home to join Bandvit Youth Academy, one of the most renowned youth clubs in Türkiye. Living in a dorm, training intensely, and facing homesickness, Şengün developed not only technical skill but resilience and independence. Coaches from Bandvit still describe him as “the player who never once asked for a break” and “the most self-driven player to come out of Bandırma.” His move to Beşiktaş in the 2020–21 season became his breakout moment. At only 18, he dominated the Turkish Basketball Super League—winning the league MVP title, a rare accomplishment for a teenager. It was then that American scouts began to view him not just as a promising player, but as a future NBA star.



Emerging as a Leader for the Turkish National Team

Before making headlines in the NBA, Şengün showcased his talent on the international stage. With the Turkish National Team, he excelled in youth competitions, including a standout performance at the 2019 U18 European Championship, where Türkiye claimed the silver medal. Representing the senior National Team, Şengün has become an essential presence—bringing his post scoring, playmaking, and court vision to international competitions.

In the summer of 2025, Alperen Şengün played a pivotal role in Türkiye's run to finals at FIBA EuroBasket 2025 in Riga, Latvia. He consistently delivered high-level performances throughout the tournament, anchoring the team in scoring, rebounding, and assists, demonstrating the same versatility and composure that have defined his NBA career so far. His leadership and strategic thinking on the court helped Türkiye reach the championship game, marking one of the nation's most impressive campaigns in recent European competitions.

NBA Breakthrough: A Pivot Putting Up Unthinkable Numbers

After that bumpy start, when his new career began in the NBA, nobody knew what to expect from him. But by his 5th NBA season (2025–26), Şengün—or Alpi, as he is nicknamed by teammates and fans—has fully transcended the traditional expectations of a “center” and transformed himself from a clever young role player into one of the league's most elite and competitive centers.

His mid-December 2025 stats show that he is averaging 23 points, 9 rebounds, and 7 assists per game—an extraordinary stat line for any big man, let alone someone playing center. In the season opener against the Oklahoma City Thunder on October 21, Şengün erupted for 39 points and 11 rebounds, a jaw-dropping performance that immediately signaled that he was no longer just a role player. Ironically, Oklahoma City—the same team that selected Şengün on draft night in 2021, only to trade him away—now found itself overpowered by the player it once let go. Alpi did not merely beat the Thunder that night; he dominated them, as if closing a long-open chapter of his career.

That performance was no anomaly. As the season unfolded, Şengün continued to expose elite defenses with a rare blend of footwork, vision, and patience. On November 16, his game against the Orlando Magic led his team to a solid win, while

Alpi dropped 30 points, 12 rebounds, and 8 assists—highlighting how rare it is to see such all-around production from a center in today's NBA. What makes these numbers even more astonishing is that he's doing them while anchoring the paint, meaning he remains a true pivot—battling inside player, setting screens, directing traffic—yet producing the all-around stat lines of a superstar guard. For a center to simultaneously function as a scorer, rebounder, and primary offensive creator is considered unprecedented. Commentators across the NBA often remark that Şengün “thinks the game two steps ahead,” and his playmaking ability has drawn comparisons to elite European players such as Nikola Jokić. While many initially labeled him “Baby Joker” (a reference to Jokić), now they argue that Alpi is forging a style entirely his own.



His evolving game has prompted commentators to abandon the initial comparison and recognize that Şengün has a distinctive style that will continue to challenge the traditional norms of basketball. Several analysts predict that if he continues this trajectory, he may soon enter legitimate MVP discussions.

The Rockets' decision to commit to him long-term with a major contract extension further signals his trajectory. He is no longer the young prospect trying to prove himself—he is the centerpiece.

What's Next for Alperen Şengün?

For Turkish Americans, Şengün's rise is more than a sports story. It is a reflection of perseverance, cultural pride, and the limitless potential of young athletes bridging two worlds. He has become a role model for a new generation—showing that discipline, passion, and self-belief can carry a player from the courts of Giresun to the bright lights of the NBA's biggest arenas.

As the Rockets continue to develop a young and exciting roster, expectations for Şengün grow each year. Basketball experts across both continents predict that he has not yet reached his ceiling. With improved defense, continued leadership growth, and expanding offensive range, he could become one of the defining big men of the next decade. For now, one thing is certain: Alperen Şengün isn't just representing Türkiye in the NBA—he is reshaping what it means to be a Turkish basketball star on the global stage.

And for our community, his story is a powerful reminder that the American dream and the Turkish spirit can coexist—beautifully, in harmony, and with pride. ■

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH



ŞEFİKA KUTLUER

“Turkish flutist Şefika Kutluer has one of the most alluring sounds we have ever heard, matched with a formidable technique... She takes her place as one of the most dazzling flute soloists on the world scene.”

— *The New York Times*



Photo Credit: IHA

BY FERIHA İŞTAR

After a 47 year long absence, the renowned flutist Şefika Kutluer returned to Washington, DC and reunited with her admirers through two separate concerts. In 1987, she had come to Washington as part of the events for the Süleyman the Magnificent exhibition held at the National Gallery of Art, during which she performed at Kennedy Center and Carnegie Hall. This time, welcoming our distinguished artist—known as the “Magic Flute”—at ATA-DC House for our first cultural event filled us with immense pride. We also had the opportunity to get to know her closely. We are deeply grateful for her sincere responses and for giving us the chance to learn more about her.

How did you start your journey with the flute, which has become a big part of your life, and why did you choose it?

Music has been an inseparable part of my life since early childhood. The person who recognized my musical talent and encouraged me to study music at a conservatory was the renowned composer Ulvi Cemal Erkin, a close family acquaintance. I was seven years old at the time. Ulvi Cemal Erkin tested whether I had a musical ear and said, “This child must definitely study at the conservatory.” Thanks to this encouragement, I passed the entrance exams of the Ankara

From the concert at the ATA-DC House



State Conservatory and, while still in the fourth grade of elementary school, began my conservatory education in the piano class with Kamuran Gündemir. After finishing elementary school, an instrument selection was made, and the committee chose the flute, saying that I was virtually created to play it. I completed my conservatory education over ten years, advancing four grades due to my high level, and graduated with highest honors. Later, I went to Rome and then Vienna for my master's studies and soloist career. The flute became an integral part of my life, while the piano has continued as my second instrument. For me, the sound of the flute is a magical key that opens the door to my spiritual home. It is a divine gift bestowed upon me by God. In mythology, the flute is also known as "the instrument of the gods," and it has always been described as sacred and imbued with magic.

How do you start your day as an artist and how many hours do you spend working?

This varies from person to person and depends on the repertoire. However, I can say that at least 5 hours a day is necessary to keep one's condition at a high level. Especially on

days when I am recording a CD, my flute practice can reach up to ten hours a day. Between my concerts, CD recordings, the work for the international Şefika Kutluer Festival that I have been organizing for 16 years, my radio program, rehearsals, and my social activities with various non-governmental organizations—most notably my role as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador—I hardly notice how the day passes. Before a concert, I always have my own distinctive technical and conditioning routines. After the concert, I am especially happy spending time in nature and with my family.

You are widely known by the nickname "Magic Flute" Could you tell us when and by whom this name was giving to you?

Years ago, after my first concert at Carnegie Hall in New York, a writer from The New York Times used the headline "The Magic Flute." From that moment on, the name has always been used. This title brought me both a wonderful excitement and a great sense of responsibility. Later, the same title was also used in the laudatory reviews published in the American Record Guide.

How do you prepare yourself before going on stage? Do you have a certain ritual?

First, I start with my own technical practice. Then I rehearse with my accompanists. Of course, we always make time for a



Community members and concert goers with Kutluer

rehearsal in the concert hall. And before stepping onto the stage, I always pray before going on stage.

What criteria do you consider when selecting a piece for your repertoire?

I choose the repertoire that best suits me based on criteria such as the audience I will be performing for, the significance of the day, the characteristics of the venue, and the variety of instruments that will accompany me.

Which piece is difficult for you to play but gives you the most joy?

One of the most challenging works in the flute repertoire, J. Ibert's Concerto is among the most brilliant pieces ever composed for flute and large orchestra. I have had the great pleasure of performing this work with many renowned orchestras, including the Royal Philharmonic, St. Petersburg Philharmonic, Lithuanian Philharmonic, Kosovo Philharmonic, and Beirut Philharmonic.

Where are your favorite and preferred venues for performing?

I have given concerts at many of the world's most prestigious and renowned venues, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center



and the Kennedy Center in the United States, as well as Bolshoi Theatre, St. Petersburg Philharmonic Hall, Tokyo Suntory Hall, and Prague's Rudolfinum. These and similar concert halls are always among my preferred venues. I also greatly appreciate the atmosphere and acoustics of churches.

Finally, what does the flute represent for you? If you were to define it in one word, what would it be?

The flute has always been a part of my life. The piano continues as my second instrument. The sound of the flute is a magical key for me—it opens the door to my spiritual home. I believe the flute is a divine gift given to me by God.

In mythology, the flute is also known as the “instrument of the gods,” and it has always been described as possessing sacredness and magic. I know how profound the meaning of breath is, and I feel that this magical instrument has been bestowed upon me. I consider myself very fortunate in this regard. If I had to express what the flute means to me in a single word, I would say “Confidanta.” I have been sharing my deep feelings with my instrument and so it has been my close confidante and best friend all along the way. ■



WASHINGTON HONORS 102 YEARS OF THE TURKISH REPUBLIC



MUSIC, DIPLOMACY AND HERITAGE

TURKISH AMERICANS AND DIPLOMATS FROM BOTH COUNTRIES GATHERED
IN WASHINGTON, DC TO CELEBRATE THE TURKISH **REPUBLIC DAY**



BY DEMET CABBAR

On the most recent national holiday in 2025, Turkish nationals celebrated the 102nd anniversary of the Republic of Türkiye across the country and at foreign missions around the world. As part of these celebrations, the American Turkish Association of Washington, D.C. organized a Republic Day Ball on November 1st, with the participation of the Ambassador of Türkiye, Mr. Sedat Önal, former U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye, Mr. Francis Joseph Ricciardone and Ambassador of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Mrs. Damla Güçlü.

ATA-DC's gala night marked the 102nd Anniversary of the Republic of Türkiye, bringing together members of the diplomatic community, Turkish-American leaders in the greater Washington, D.C. area as well as representatives from other non-profit organizations. The evening paid tribute to the founding vision of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, celebrating his transformative leadership and enduring principles, while also highlighting the lasting values, cultural richness, and dynamic spirit of the Turkish Republic.

The program featured a keynote address by Ambassador Francis Joseph Ricciardone, Jr. (Ret.), former United States Ambassador to Türkiye, who reflected on the Republic's historic journey and its evolving role on the global stage. "Türkiye's founding was rooted in an extraordinary commitment to sovereignty, reform, and modern statehood," Ambassador Ricciardone said. His Excellency Sedat Önal, Ambassador of the Republic of Türkiye to the United States, also delivered remarks, underscoring the importance of unity and shared responsibility. "Republic Day is a moment to honor our past while renewing our commitment to the principles that continue to guide our nation," Ambassador Önal noted.

The evening was enriched by a captivating performance by Selin Geçit, a young and rising star in Türkiye's contemporary music scene, whose artistry resonated with guests throughout the celebration. The event was further honored by the presence of Ambassador Damla Güçlü of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Murat Uğurluoğlu, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of the Republic of Türkiye. Guests enjoyed a festive cocktail hour, dinner, and live entertainment, including a guest DJ set by Seyhan Duru.

The program was presented by Master of Ceremonies Firat Emiroğlu, whose warmth and energy set the tone for the evening. ATA-DC leadership expressed gratitude to all who attended and supported the event. "Celebrations like this reflect the strength of our community and our commitment to sharing Turkish culture and values in Washington, D.C.," ATA-DC President Sevtap Schreffler said. The night concluded as both a proud commemoration of 102 years of the Republic and a vibrant expression of Turkish-American community life in the U.S. capital.

Extending the Republic Day observances, Turkish Embassy also hosted a celebratory reception at the Ambassador's residence on October 29th. Ambassador Sedat Önal highlighted Türkiye's crucial role in promoting global peace and security, noting the positive trajectory of Türkiye-U.S. relations in his speech at the event. He also underscored the contributions of the Turkish-American organizations and community to bilateral relations. The event featured remarks from U.S. officials, including Congressmen Joe Wilson, Pete Sessions, and Ryan Zinke, as well as CMS Administrator Dr. Mehmet Öz. A proclamation from the Governor of Maryland honoring the 102nd Anniversary of the Turkish Republic was presented to Ambassador Önal, marking a meaningful close to the Republic Day celebrations. ■



SELIN GEÇİT DELIVERS A CAPTIVATING LIVE PERFORMANCE, FILLING THE EVENING WITH A VIBRANT CELEBRATION OF MODERN TURKISH SOUNDS.



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WHEN YOUNG CREATORS TAKE THE LEAD:

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— John Lasseter



BY NISAN NAZ KUTLUKAYA

Ever since I was little, I loved reading magazines. There was one magazine in particular that I adored called “Super Penguin.” It was a fun little magazine that talked about trending topics in science and pop culture. I remember waiting eagerly for a new issue to come out and rushing to read it the day it arrived. At some point, I grew tired of waiting, and my impatience took over. I decided to create my own magazine. It was a shabby paper booklet I filled with my 7-year-old drawings and articles I made up on the spot. Even though it was poorly made, I fell in love with it. I called my paper creation “Uçan Balon” and begged my dad to make photocopies of it. That night, my family came together to create a mini production line. We ended up making enough copies for my entire class, and with gleaming sparkles in my eyes, I took them all to school and handed them out. As my friends started reading them, seeing their smiles lit a passion

in me that I didn’t even know existed. I loved the feeling of creating something for other people to read and enjoy. Being able to share my interests gave me a joy I couldn’t describe. As I grew up, I slowly forgot about the magazine I once cherished so dearly. That was until a few years back, when I saw a sign saying there was an opening in my school’s yearbook staff. It read, “Understaffed, we need journalists and designers.” Applying for that position soon turned into me working as a design lead for my school’s yearbook.

Throughout those years, I learned how to interview people, reach out to businesses, capture important moments, and document them thoroughly. Even though dealing with the yearbook’s extremely harsh deadlines was incredibly difficult, I learned how to lead a team to create a print publication and take pride in the final product.

This summer, while scrolling through social media, I came across an online literary magazine. They were collecting people's artwork and poems through submissions and creating online issues featuring those works. I was fascinated by the concept. As I dug deeper, I discovered an entire teen-run literary magazine community, united by the goal of keeping art and literature alive in a time when passions are often overshadowed by the college admissions process. Seeing this made me think about myself and my friends across various countries. We all love to create, but we believed our passions for tech and art could be nothing more than hobbies. So we decided to start our own magazine that explores the intersection between technology and creativity. In the magazine, we discuss technological achievements, how they were made, how they work, and how art and design play a huge role in their creation. With that motivation in mind, our international magazine "Cyber Diet" was born.

The name "Cyber Diet" originated from the amount of technology we are exposed to on a daily basis. We wanted to create a magazine that sheds light on the technology around us and explains how it works, helping people understand what they are exposing their bodies and minds to every day. We also aim to provide a comfortable space for teens who

love art and want to pursue careers in art&technology, allowing them to learn and connect with like-minded individuals. I understand how fortunate I am that my school and the programs around my community allow me to learn and experience advanced topics in technology and information. However, I also know that not everyone has access to these opportunities. That is why our magazine aims to share both basic and advanced technological and artistic information, giving children and teens a chance to learn new skills and knowledge that can help them in the future. With the funds we gather from magazine sales, our ultimate objective is to purchase technology kits such as VEX, LEGO robotics kits, and FRC equipment for underfunded schools in Türkiye, my home country, so that those kids and teens can also have the opportunity to learn, explore, and experience our connection with art and technology.

If I'm being honest, I never believed our magazine would be anything more than another idea in my sketchbook. But watching it come alive through months of effort has given it a special place in my heart and made me incredibly grateful to everyone who worked on this passion project with me. I am extremely happy with how the first issue came together, and I can't wait to see what future issues of our magazine hold for us and our goal! ■



Co-editors of "Cyber Diet" Nisan Naz Kutlukaya, Natasha Williams and Dalia Rees together



ATATÜRK SCHOOL STARTED THE NEW YEAR WITH JOY AND EXCITEMENT



In late December, ATA-DC's Atatürk School hosted a First Semester Celebration and New Year Party

BY SEMA YELKEN

The ATA-DC Ataturk School concluded 2025 with an engaging and successful academic program, marking a year filled with learning, achievement, and community spirit. As we move forward into 2026, we are eager to build on this momentum with even more dynamic educational and cultural programs that will inspire our students and families.

The move from McLean High School to the ATA-DC House for the 2025-2026 school year has created genuine excitement among parents, students, and teachers. Based on initial feedback from our community, parents are happy by the possibilities that come with having our own dedicated space, seeing it as an opportunity for closer community connections and enhanced cultural experiences for their children. Students are eager to explore new activities, learn in an environment tailored to their heritage, and take part in events that celebrate their culture and identity. Our students are happy to have their very own Ataturk Corner in each classroom. With dedicated pinboards, they eagerly showcase their Ataturk poems, hand-drawn portraits, and colorful artwork, taking pride in expressing their creativity and honoring Ataturk together.

At our new ATA-DC House, the school community came together to celebrate three significant Turkish National Days with great excitement, pride, and honor. ATA-DC President Sevtap Schreffler welcomed our community for the October 29th Turkish Republic Day 102nd Anniversary which was marked by vibrant festivities, including student performances and reflections on the meaning of "Republic," fostering a deep sense of unity and patriotism. We concluded the festivity with a celebratory cake on our first year anniversary at ATA-DC House. In November, the school commemorated the 87th anniversary of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's passing. The event included the Turkish National Anthem, a moment of silence, poetry recitations, a student presentation, placing red carnations around his bust and remarks from the principal. The November 24th Head Teacher Ataturk and National Teachers Appreciation Day provided a special opportunity to recognize and celebrate the dedication of our educators, with students and families expressing gratitude and admiration for their lasting impact. These events not only strengthened our connection to Turkish heritage but also highlighted the joy and honor of organizing and participating in these meaningful celebrations as a united community.

PROGRAMS UPDATE

Every Sunday, Young Cultural Ambassador Program (YCAP) members volunteer at our school, enriching our community by fostering volunteerism and cross-cultural dialogue. Their most meaningful impact comes from mentoring younger students during class breaks—engaging them in Turkish conversations, sharing personal experiences, and leading activities like Turkish word games. Their presence not only boosts students' language skills and cultural pride, but also strengthens their confidence, sense of belonging, and enthusiasm for participating in school events and traditions, helping nurture a vibrant and supportive environment for all.

In late December, the school hosted a First Semester Celebration and New Year Party. Students were recognized with completion certificates, holiday gift bags presented by Santa and Mrs. Claus, and a thoughtfully curated winter break booklet. The occasion marked the year's end as a meaningful gathering, uniting students, families, faculty, administrators, and ATA-DC board members in celebrating shared accomplishments. The collective pride and enthusiasm underscored a strong sense of community and achievement.

We are also excited to announce the launch of our new Turkish Folk Dance Team for students ages 5-11, with classes beginning on Sunday, January 11, 2026, and an eagerly anticipated performance scheduled for Sunday, April 26, 2026. Our new Turkish folk dance coach captivated families and students with an engaging introduction on the rich cultural significance and joy of Turkish folk dancing and answering questions. The response has been overwhelmingly positive with parents and students. We look forward to seeing our young folk dancers embrace this vibrant tradition and shine on stage!

Looking ahead, the school is poised for an exciting 2026, fostering new academic pursuits, embracing fresh expanded cultural opportunities, and working collaboratively with students, families, and educators to ensure continued growth, engagement, and shared success.

With fresh initiatives on the horizon and an enthusiastic school community ready to participate, there is genuine anticipation for a year filled with memorable milestones. We can't wait to see our students and families flourish together, making 2026 a truly amazing chapter in our school's long history.



☀ A PROMISING FIRST SEMESTER FOR YOUNG CULTURAL AMBASSADORS

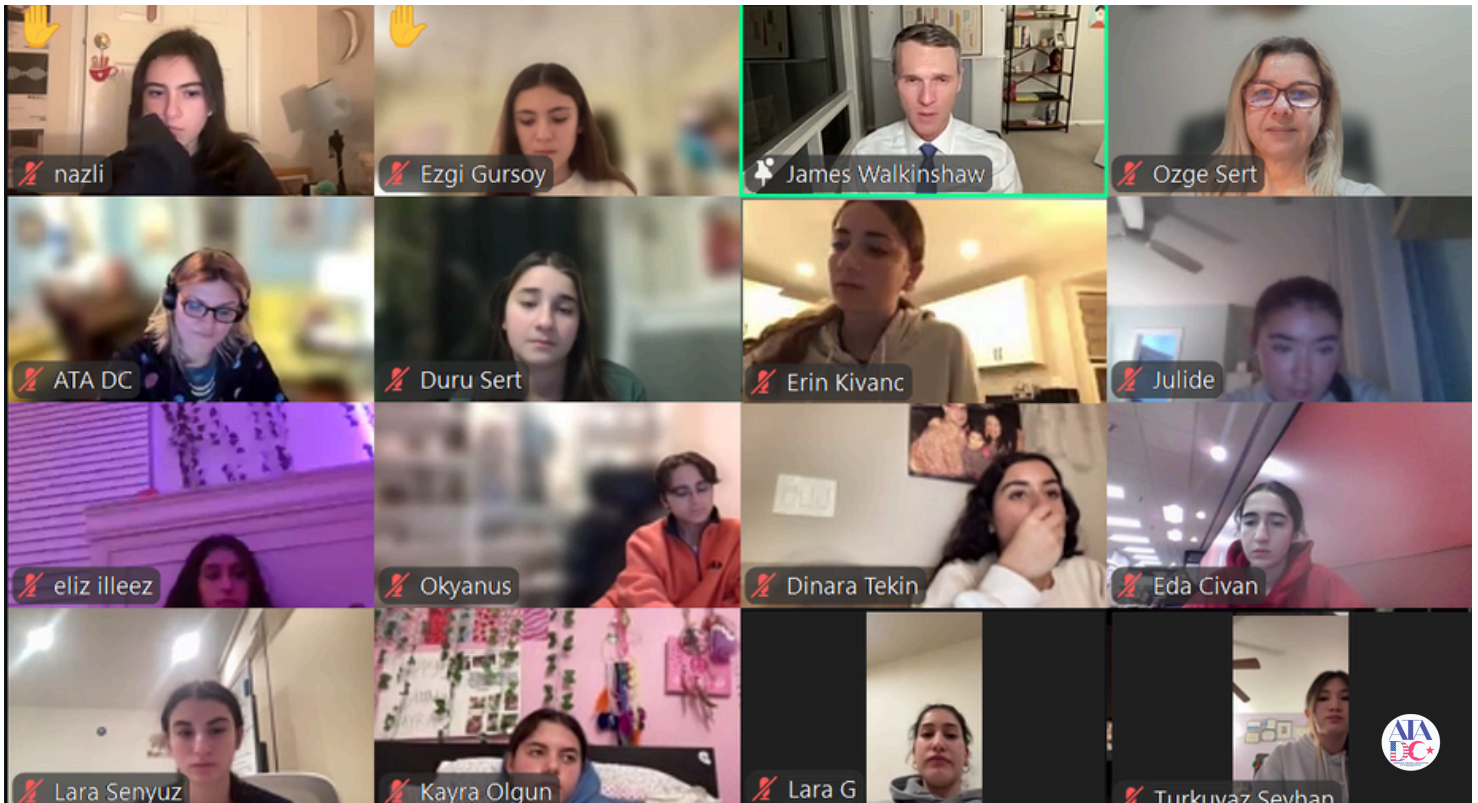
BY DEMET CABBAR

ATA-DC's Young Cultural Ambassador Program (YCAP) concluded its first semester with a sense of pride, momentum, and community. On Sunday afternoon, December 14, Young Cultural Ambassadors gathered at the ATA-DC House for an end-of-year potluck celebration, marking three months of learning, volunteering at the Turkish Festival and ATA-DC Ataturk School, leadership, and civic engagement. With homemade dishes, lively conversation, and shared laughter, the gathering reflected the strong bonds and collaborative spirit that have quickly become hallmarks of the program.

YCAP participants have already demonstrated meaningful impact through hands-on civic initiatives. Among the highlights was the leadership shown by Young Cultural Ambassador Kayra Olgun, whose dedication helped secure an official World Turkic Languages Day Proclamation from the Mayor of Fairfax City. Celebrated on December 15, the day recognizes the Turkic language family—spoken by more than 200 million people worldwide and spanning Türkiye, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and beyond. Through her efforts, Kayra helped raise awareness of the importance of preserving linguistic heritage and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Another notable achievement came from Altay Düzyol, a YCAP participant and high school student, who successfully completed his program assignment by securing a Montgomery County proclamation recognizing December 5, 2025, as World Turkish Coffee Culture Day. Altay's initiative highlighted not only Turkish coffee's cultural significance, but also the power of youth leadership and civic participation. His work exemplified the program's emphasis on translating cultural pride into public engagement and community outreach.

Throughout the semester, Young Cultural Ambassadors benefited from direct exposure to leaders in public service, business, and civil society. The group was honored to welcome Congressman James Walkinshaw as a keynote speaker, engaging in a candid discussion on leadership, public service, and constituent engagement. YCAPs also participated in an inspiring session on civic engagement with Lydia Borland, President of LB International Solutions, and Lincoln McCurdy, former President of the Turkish Coalition of America and the American Turkish Council, whose perspectives enriched discussions on advocacy and Turkish-American relations.



PROGRAMS UPDATE



Additional sessions –including a Thanksgiving-themed workshop led by ATA-DC board member and YCAP Supervisor Demet Cabbar, exploring cultural narratives, misconceptions, and the importance of shaping and owning one’s story–rounded out a rich and engaging semester.

When YCAs gathered for a holiday party at the ATA-DC House on December 14th, they reflected the fulfillment, connection and growth fostered over the course of 2025. Despite of the snowy conditions, both students and parents enjoyed the festive activities and networking opportunities at the party. As YCAP looks ahead to the next semester, the accomplishments of its first cohort signal a bright future—one led by informed, engaged, and culturally confident young leaders. ATA-DC’s Young Cultural Ambassador Program is a high-school leadership initiative designed to empower youth through volunteerism, civic engagement, and community service, helping them build confidence and a strong sense of responsibility to their communities.

The program also addressed emerging global issues shaping the future of young leaders through an engaging session on artificial intelligence, led by Brian Schreffler, CEO and Founder of Binery Technology Solutions and a seasoned U.S. public-sector technologist with nearly four decades of experience across government and the private sector. The session explored both the opportunities and risks of AI, including AI hallucinations, data privacy concerns, real-world fraud such as AI-enabled scams, and the responsible use of AI in schools—encouraging students to think critically about ethics, digital literacy, and how AI can be used as a learning tool rather than a shortcut.

YCAP also emphasized entrepreneurship and cultural diplomacy. During a visit to the Turkish Coffee Lady Café in Alexandria, participants met founder Gizem White, a former ATA-DC president and the founder of YCAP in 2017. Gizem shared her journey of building a mission-driven business rooted in cultural storytelling and community engagement, offering students valuable lessons on entrepreneurship and cultural diplomacy.



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