“This is acknowledgment for him and an acknowledgment for the Armenian community.”
– author and former journalist Mark Arax
Fresno Unified has honored Roger Tatarian’s life and accomplishments by renaming Forkner Elementary School to H. Roger Tatarian Elementary School.

An official celebration for the new name was held Sept. 7. The son of an Armenian immigrant shoemaker, Mr. Tatarian rose to the highest ranks in newspaper journalism, serving as editor-in-chief of the United Press International (UPI) news service. His distinguished career spanned more than three decades in news capitals around the world before he returned to his hometown to teach journalism at Fresno State. He is the only person to be named both Fresno State’s outstanding professor (1981) and alumnus (1984). Mr. Tatarian died in 1995 at the age of 78.

Despite his prominence, Mr. Tatarian was approachable to students and transitioned easily to teaching. Students vied for seats in his classes. Many former students and colleagues attended the renaming celebration at his namesake school.

“This is acknowledgment for him and an acknowledgment for the Armenian community,” said writer and former journalist Mark Arax, a leader for the name change and a student and friend of Mr. Tatarian’s.

Tatarian Elementary will be the first school in Fresno Unified to be named for an Armenian. The Fresno Unified Board of Education voted Oct. 13 to replace the name of J.C. Forkner on the northwest Fresno school with Tatarian’s after members of the community brought information forward that Forkner
used deed restrictions that kept Armenians and other people of color from buying homes.

“To say I was thrilled is an understatement,” said Marshall D. Moushigian, a Fresno attorney/financial advisor and member of the renaming steering committee. “To have waited over a century to have a school named for one of us was simply another in a long line of indignations that we endured and moved past as we successfully built our individual lives and our community.”

Hrach Roger Tatarian was born in Fresno and grew up in the southeast region of the city. He attended Jackson Elementary School and Longfellow Junior High School. At Longfellow, vice principal Ruby Johnson Pratt recognized his talent and asked him to write for the school newspaper, “The Longfellow Poet,” sparking his interest in journalism.

He graduated from Roosevelt High School in 1934, where he was a senior class president, graduated Cum Laude and was among five commencement speakers. The June 5, 1934 Roosevelt News newspaper notes Mr. Tatarian as its copy editor.

Mr. Tatarian was editor of the student newspaper at Fresno State, The Daily Collegian, and graduated in 1938 with a degree in political science. (Fresno State did not offer a journalism degree at the time.)

Two weeks after graduating, Mr. Tatarian was hired by the Fresno bureau of UPI, which supplies stories to thousands of newspapers, magazines and broadcasting outlets. A year later he was hired by the San Francisco bureau of UPI. He then was asked to open a bureau in Phoenix, where he decided to drop “Hrach” and go with just “Roger Tatarian” because New York editors reading his byline thought it was garbled. At age 24, Mr. Tatarian was promoted to reporting from the Washington, D.C. UPI bureau.

He was a war correspondent during World War II, continuing to work for UPI for 34 years after the war as a reporter and editor throughout the world. Mr. Tatarian served as general news manager for Europe, the Middle East and Africa. He was bureau chief in London and Rome and also served as news editor in Washington, D.C. before becoming editor-in-chief at UPI.

He served as a Pulitzer Prize nomination juror in 1960, 1961 and 1985. Other awards and honors include the Elijah Parrish Lovejoy Award, a special citation by Ohio University and an honorary doctorate in law from Colby College in Maine and honorary doctorate in letters from Windham College in Vermont. He was named a fellow of the Society of Professional Journalists – Sigma Chi Delta and was among the first group of journalists inducted into the society’s New York chapter Hall of Fame, along with Walter Cronkite.

After retiring from UPI, Mr. Tatarian returned to Fresno State to join the
journalism faculty, mentoring and training a new generation of journalists for 15 years. He also provided commentary on local public television and worked as a consultant and writing coach for newspapers, including The Fresno Bee, where he wrote a regular column. A collection of his columns, “Day of Mourning, Day of Shame,” was published posthumously in 1996.

“He was a man of great confidence, skills and character, but these traits never showed up as puffy ego,” Arax said.

Fresno State honored Mr. Tatarian’s legacy with the Roger Tatarian Endowed Chair in Journalism, the Roger Tatarian Journalism Grant, the Roger Tatarian Symposium and a plaza near the building where he taught.

Now, Fresno Unified is paying tribute to one of the city’s most distinguished Armenians.

“This [name] selection is just an acknowledgment that a great human being came through here, rose to the heights of his profession, then came back home to build the second-best journalism program in the country. He put Fresno State journalism on the map.” Arax said.

“We’re also giving a nod to a culture that arguably shaped early Fresno more than any other culture.”

As part of the process of choosing a mascot – the Hawks – the district developed a video and an activity that all students participated in toward the end of the last school year.