

Andreas Dracopoulos is Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), which was founded in 1996, following the passing of his great uncle, the late Stavros Niarchos. He was born and raised in Athens, Greece, and graduated from Athens College. He received a Bachelor of Science in Economics from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He lives in New York City.

During one of his short visits to Greece, we met up with him on a sunny morning in downtown Athens, at the state-of-the-art facilities of iMEDD, a nonprofit organization founded through an exclusive grant by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF). Two major SNF health and culture events had preceded our conversation, and Mr. Dracopoulos expressed his satisfaction with the outcome of both. Indeed, shortly before we began our discussion, he referred, in great detail, to the Foundation's long journey, as well as its most significant grants.

As our discussion continues, I realize that the man in front of me is someone with an unconventional personality. He is dressed simply and frugally, he expresses himself in an open, unfiltered manner, and there is a torrential flow to his words when he speaks about things that bother him. He has a particular sense of humor, is both pleasant and communicative, and is a man who answers all questions unsparingly, even when he knows that his answers may dissatisfy many people.

He feels very proud to be Greek, loves Cavafy and Martin Luther King Jr., and believes deeply in the power of young people. In this comprehensive interview to LiFO, he talks about the Foundation, the grants, the crisis, politics, the 2021 initiative [to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Greek Revolution of 1821], young people, social media, happiness, the strongest memories he has of his great uncle, and what he personally considers important in life.

### **What was the purpose of the two events you organized this week?**

Since the Foundation's inception in 1996, we have been intently focused on our work. Our goal is to contribute as much as we can, so that the state can provide better services that lead to a better life. Therefore, the difference between promotion and recognition is very subtle. Many times, in the past, we did not know how to communicate our philanthropic activity. Maybe because there was an establishment that didn't like what we had started, and we were challenging the status quo. Since then, the SNFCC marked a big step in terms of our planning, even though a lot of people confuse the Foundation with the Cultural Center. You know, in Greece, philanthropy is very often perceived as an activity used to either hide something or to profit from. Consequently, these two events on health and culture were organized in order to highlight how—in practice—the Foundation

supports programs that contribute to the collaboration between actors from the public and the private sectors, as effective means of supporting the common good.

**Don't you think that sometimes the true meaning of these grants is lost, in the sense that citizens are not interested in the grant amounts, but in the result?**

Undoubtedly, the total amount of money is what reflects the size of a grant. As a Foundation, we could have also engaged in a public relations approach. For example, the Health Initiative totals more than €400 million. However, because we are all used to being a bit blasé, we choose to focus and promote the monetary amounts, because, on the one hand, it is the only way to attract the interest of the public and, on the other hand, to communicate the real substance and the result of these grants.

**Is the cooperation between the state and private actors a one-way street?**

Obviously. The example of the Cultural Center is indicative. The Foundation undertook the total cost of the construction and outfitting of the SNFCC and its delivery, upon completion, to the Greek state. In fact, we continue to support it in every way possible, by offering significant grants. In almost no part of the world can the state function independently and without the involvement of private actors. We, as I have repeatedly emphasized, are not here to replace, but to complement the state. Moreover: we do not wish to do so. And even if we wanted to, we would not be able to. And even if we were able to, we shouldn't be doing it.

**Can social problems be solved through philanthropy?**

Of course not, but why be negative? I am among those who believe that we should all stand and move forward together. Global problems are now complex. Private philanthropy cannot replace the public sector. However, the support of philanthropic organizations can complement the work of the public sector, in order to bring about the appropriate results that will contribute to creating a better society for all. Metaphorically speaking, I would say that philanthropy is the “third leg” in addition to the public and private sectors. Consider this: during the construction of the SNFCC, we worked with seven different governments. Furthermore, we do not ask for anything in return, and that precisely is our strength. However, in Greece it seems quite weird when you're not eyeballing something, so they don't know how to react to you. The only area where we are unrelenting—and sometimes this is misunderstood as a sign of arrogance—is our rigorous approach to checking whether what we are funding is implemented properly and centered around the citizen.

**Three years after its delivery to the Greek State, its number of visits reached 6.3 million in 2019, compared to 5.3 million in 2018 and 3.1 million in 2017. What does the Cultural Center mean for Greek society?**

It certainly far exceeded our expectations, but it was a winning bet. The SNFCC is one of the most important cultural and educational projects ever implemented in Greece. At first, there were objections and doubts about its effectiveness, but the people embraced it and, most importantly, respected it. Its unique advantage is that it features a wide range of activities, which is extremely attractive.

Personally, if I lived in Athens, I would visit it on a daily basis.

**During the event on culture, you said: “Culture is the permanent exhibition at the National Gallery, but also the heavy metal cover of one of Hatzidakis’ songs at the Greek National Opera.”**

It is a priority for us to give young people a voice. Today, unfortunately, we do not listen to them. Culture is not only about creators and founders of organizations, but about people like Kimon, the student from the Music School of Pallini who, in writing down his impressions in the SNFCC guestbook five years ago, was the reason for the launch of SNF’s grant to music schools in Greece. It is about Giorgos and Pantelis who, after their participation in the Schoolwave student music festival, were up on the GNO stage. It is about Vangelis, who talked about his participation in the SNFCC’s paid internship program, supported by SNF, which opened up new horizons and opportunities for a good job. And it is about the young man, as we saw in the video of the event, who participated as a volunteer in the Schoolwave festival, simply to help with cleaning up. And I want to dwell on this story. This young man, although not able to participate in this festival as he would have liked, still found a way to contribute in solidarity. As he very rightly pointed out: “Don’t be an asshole. Contribute.” This phrase had a dual meaning. He didn’t give up because he couldn’t go up on stage, but instead preferred to help others in another practical way. As the medical student at the corresponding event on health stated, in a simple and straightforward manner: “With initiatives such as these, you make me want to stay in Greece.” There could not be a better closing than that. What can you say after that...

**Is Greek society now mature enough to accept a young person singing heavy metal on the stage of the National Opera?**

Young people, today, are more mature than older people. The question is not only whether society can follow these young people, but whether it can also appreciate similar examples. And, because it was reported that the discussion on culture lasted many hours, I wanted to mention that people were free to leave at any time. At any rate, criticism does not bother me at all. We simply tried a new

presentation format, to discuss the importance of culture in our lives. I don't think it is a bad thing to take a long time to talk about something, as long as you have something to say, of course. Unfortunately, however, many people in Greece are bothered by long events, because we have been taught to speak, rather than to listen.

**How do you explain the fact that, in our country, foundations are treated with a hint of suspicion?**

In general terms, those who express this point of view are not wrong to do so. To be precise, I would say that this suspicion is not unfounded. That is why, as a Foundation, we very much strive to ensure all possible transparency and credibility safeguards, so that there is never any perception that we are trying to hide something. However, SNF has no shareholders, no business or commercial activities. Its assets are devoted to philanthropic activity, as carried out through SNF's four main program areas: Arts & Culture, Education, Health & Sports, and Social Welfare.

**Is there a lot of talk about investment? In your opinion, how can Greece become attractive and reduce bureaucratic obstacles?**

Greece has all the necessary tools to attract investment. I was also often met with obstacles, but I always pushed through to overcome them. Fortunately, because we only give without receiving anything, there are many out there willing to help, considering the political cost, if a grant is lost. But, obviously, many more important steps are necessary, such as changes in legislation, as well as the creation of appropriate structures that will favor and attract investor interest.

**In the past, you have written about “a deeply rooted disease and sepsis that has been incubating for decades.” Can this mindset change? And do you think the crisis was the result of economic or moral/political bankruptcy?**

Unfortunately, if someone showed up tomorrow and paid off Greece's entire public debt, I believe that, in three years' time, we would be back in the same soup which led us to bankruptcy. We still hold the view that we are the hotshots who fooled the others, who got away with it and succeeded. We are always saying “Greece never dies.” And Greece is almost dead, and we didn't even realize.

**Did we learn nothing from the crisis?**

I fear that those over the age of 35 have not realized the magnitude of the problem. I am singling out young people, who were deeply wounded by the crisis; only if they gain strength, then perhaps something will be saved. In fact, I would

risk handing over the country's destiny to young people, despite their inexperience, because it is the only way to break this chain that keeps holding us down.

### **Is our society egocentric?**

The shift towards individuality is a global trend and not only affects Greek society. As a people, we have many positives: we have “philotimo,” we are smart, hard-working, and hospitable, but all these attributes are only activated when we are not in Greece. We have them in our DNA, but on our home turf something goes wrong, and we “sabotage” each other. I don't know how this can be remedied. Maybe I will think about it at some point if I ever get involved in politics...

### **Is that something you would be interested in?**

In theory, yes. However, there are practical difficulties. Fortunately, through the Foundation, we have much more to offer than we would through politics, which is filled with endemic, deep-rooted problems. Undoubtedly, the notion of a deep-seated state—the system—still reigns supreme, consisting of chronic mindsets, pathologies, and clientelistic practices. Envy for others is a carcinoma of the soul. Think about what the teacher and manager of the Schoolwave festival, Mr. Christos Ioannidis, mentioned, that is, the number of different words, such as “μέσον,” “κονέ,” “βύσμα,” and “δόντι,” that exist in the Greek language to express the notion of “having an in with somebody” or “pulling some strings.” This, I think, best describes the concept of the deep-seated state. And, I think it is imperative that we turn to the collective.

### **Is 2021 an opportunity to reflect on our situation, as we celebrate the 200-year anniversary of the Greek Revolution of 1821?**

Personally, I think we are overreaching just a little bit. I am not saying this in any way negatively predisposed towards these events, but I really have not grasped the central purpose of this venture. Also, I would say that it might prove a little risky, based on this type of logic: what are we trying to do? What are we trying to prove exactly? Obviously, it is useful to remember our history and to not forget. But it is also important to learn from it as well, of which I still have my doubts. So, is perhaps our purpose once again to simply celebrate? If a holistic reflective effort were to take place—with the participation of young people and important figures, considering both the financial crisis *and* the two hundred years—highlighting aspects such as “What really happened to us?”, “Why did we go bankrupt?”, and “What was the lesson of this whole story?”, then, yes, I would be all in. But, there is no time or money for celebrations and fiestas. Because, we do not have this luxury, especially at this time. And, really, I wonder: what are we

celebrating? Are we free today, with the huge Greek debt still hanging over our heads, and I didn't know about it?

**Do ideologies mean anything nowadays?**

Bollocks! Truly. There is no right or left, only the right thing to do, which is to serve public interest and the common good.

**What is your opinion on the refugee/migrant crisis?**

I live in a country, the United States, which was built by immigrants and refugees, and that is why I am among those who support immigration. No one disagrees that many mistakes are being made. We have found ourselves in a difficult situation and, as a country, no one is helping us out. But, which Europe are we talking about? In essence, Europe must protect the Greek border because it is also Europe's border. This is where we cannot negatively judge any Greek government. Ideologically, we can only make judgements. The Western world needs immigration because of the low birth rate. Migration flows to Europe are a key problem, with its institutions and member states still unable to successfully cope with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people to its territories. This is due to the absence of a regulatory framework for integration, of a common strategy, and of common asylum legislation.

**What would you advise a young person?**

It depends on each person's goals and choices. When I meet many young people abroad, who have left Greece, I usually say this to them: "My mind is happy, but my heart is sad."

**If you chose to write a motto on a wall, what would it be?**

"Wakanda Forever," from the Black Panther movie. [He makes the characteristic "X" with his arms across his chest.]

**Growing up in a multicultural environment, what did you gain as a person?**

I was lucky. But, on a personal level, I took full advantage of the opportunities presented to me, I worked hard and succeeded. It may sound harsh but, in life, you have to seize the opportunities you are given, and proceed with passion, drive, and perseverance.

**Do you believe that a person such as yourself had the right to do whatever they want in life, or did you claim this opportunity from a relatively young age?**

Everything is a matter of character. Because I have three children at the ages of 16, 13, and 10, I often return, in a certain sense, to the past. I was an ordinary kid,

but when I look back to the pages of my childhood, I realize the gravity of friendship. I think the same thing about my own children and whether they will be able to make good friends. It's a matter of luck, finding the right company. And, in my life, I have been very lucky to have great friends.

**What is the toughest question your children have ever asked you?**

What is the meaning of life. And my answer was: "I don't know."

**What would you consider revolutionary today?**

.... A difficult and multifaceted question. As an individual, I believe that an act of revolution also encompasses positive elements. Collateral damages are unavoidable, but it is important to implement disruption with a cause; with beliefs, ideals, and principles. To not rebel without a reason.

**I am under the impression that both literally and figuratively you do not "fit" in suits. Is that true?**

[Laughing]... I don't make a big thing of it. I actually feel more comfortable this way. Respect for others is not manifested through such institutional behaviors, but in a variety of ways and, above all, actions. Also, how can we still be talking about racism in our time? It's unthinkable. I remember Martin Luther King's words: "Not the color of your skin, but the content of your character." So, why would I care about the color of your skin, your sexual preferences, your political beliefs or your social and economic situation? What I care about is character. As a Foundation, we worked with the SYRIZA government and this was then commented on in various ways. I am informing you that we had the best possible collaboration.

**It took until 2020 to finally have the first female President of the Hellenic Republic, and the public sphere is dominated by issues such as abortion.**

What is important is to not have a conservative turn, just for the sake of conservatism; for the sake of appearances. And no more needs to be said.

**How would you characterize our era and why?**

Extremely complexity-ridden. We live in an era when everything is interconnected. At the same time, we are lacking in leadership models and in ethics. In conjunction with the advent of technology, it is like a floating puzzle has been created, which no one on the ground knows how to put together. We need to move past the faces and focus on the essence. We should be pondering why Donald Trump is President of the United States, and why he will be re-elected by a huge margin. In

the coming years, populism will increase even more. And, I am hoping, that from this chaos, hope will be born.

**Has social media changed the way we think?**

Of course. And, sometimes, it fuels polarization and lead us to extremes. At the same time, the smartphone and the computer are now an integral part of our daily activities. However, I do not like the image of two young people communicating via their cell phones, even though they are physically together in the same place. They're not even looking at each other's eyes. They are alienating each other.

**What is your biggest fear?**

Since I am not afraid of death, everything else is inferior. The concept of time does not scare me, but the fact that time passes and is then gone saddens me. That is why I try to be as present as I can at every stage of my life.

**Is there anything missing in your life?**

No. I feel complete, and I'm not saying this with any sense of conceit.

**What is happiness?**

To live.

**What do you remember more strongly of your uncle?**

There is much that I have preserved in my memory. If I had to choose something, it would be this: never ask for something that you yourself could not do. And moreover, first be strict with yourself, and then with others.

**What do all the accessories and bracelets that you wear on your hands symbolize?**

Moments of my life from around the world that I carry with me.

**What do you consider important in life?**

Health, love, friendship, and laughter... Lots of laughter! Laughing is not easy, but it truly is the best medicine.