

TO VIMA – Sunday, 12 September 2021

“There is great value in public libraries”

INTERVIEW TO
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Renowned for its wealth of books and services, the New York Public Library (NYPL), the “people’s library” of the American metropolis, has emerged from the pandemic with a radically renovated central circulating branch on 5th Avenue in Manhattan, thanks to a \$55 million grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), the second largest one-time individual gift in NYPL history. Five levels of browsable book stacks, an adult learning center, an entire floor dedicated to kids and teenagers, and a rooftop terrace café awaited visitors from June 1, when the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library (SNFL)—as it is now named—officially opened its doors. This August, as this year’s SNF Nostos took place at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC), we spoke with SNF Co-President **Andreas Dracopoulos** about this grant and the special place libraries hold in the Foundation’s grantmaking activity.

Years ago, on a cold January in New York, I spent several afternoons at the NYPL’s central circulating branch. At the same table as me, there were students writing their papers, as well as immigrants using the library’s free Wi-Fi to contact their relatives back home. A homeless man had entered the building to warm himself up, and was dozing off in his chair. It is with great emotion that I recall an overall feeling of warmth in the place. What are your own images of the NYPL?

The importance of a truly public space, accessible to all, has never been greater. The NYPL’s system, with 92 branches in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island, is the fourth largest library system in the world. The NYPL is also a shining example of how constructive public-private partnerships can be—and how necessary—in the world we live in today. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library (SNFL) is the largest circulating branch in the NYPL system. We are honored that our Foundation’s name (SNF) is associated with such a beautiful and important public space. The value of a public circulating library is truly great, as its vision and mission are shaped around the needs of all the people of New York City, and beyond.

SNF’s grant to the NYPL was the second largest in its history. Did the Foundation’s relationship with the city play a role?

Of course... New York is perhaps the most important city in the world, in many ways. SNF is proud to be a fundamental supporter of New York in so many socially significant projects.

SNF has supported many libraries, including the National Library of Greece (NLG), the Gennadius Library, the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF), with grants, increasing significantly in the 2010s. What is the place of libraries in SNF’s grantmaking activities?

We are living in “interesting” times... As I mentioned before, the importance of truly public spaces, of organizations that offer services, such as public libraries, *to* and *for* Society, is vital in this highly pressure-driven world we live in today. We are very proud and happy to have been able to support this great mission of libraries worldwide and, of course, we are extremely proud that the National Library of Greece has made its home at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC).

The two large-scale grants to the NLG and the NYPL create, in a sense, a kinship between the two libraries. Do you think this might encourage collaborations between them?

We always encourage and believe in partnerships of all kinds, as we do in this case, exactly as you’re describing it. It is, however, up to the partners in question; how much they will pursue it, whether they will communicate with each other, and try to figure out how they can work together efficiently, while benefiting their “clients,” i.e., People and society as a whole.

During the previous decades of digital transition, we saw grants for the procurement of equipment and the creation of digital services. Now that this has, to some extent, been achieved, which library roles are you interested in supporting?

The role of libraries to remain dedicated and faithful to their mission, that is, to serve their “clients,” the people, in every possible way.

The renovated NYPL central circulating branch now carries the name of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. In Greece, the similar naming of the new wing of the National Gallery was met with reactions from the press and the public. After 25 years of grantmaking activity, how do you comment on the reactions of Greek society to the institution of sponsorship, especially when it comes to public-private partnerships?

An interesting question, which I would flip back to you and redirect it back to your colleagues or associates in the media, as well as to all the “decision-makers” at every level... Perhaps this segment of the Press and the public you refer to needs to look in the mirror and try to differentiate between the proper recognition of a grant (which may also encourage similar charitable donations, especially in projects where the public and private sectors partner up with the sole beneficiary being Society as a whole—SNF is not a “sponsor” with all that this implies; we do not advertise, we do not sell a product, we do not profit from any project, we do not “give in order to get,”—we just give, which I understand is difficult for most people to understand, but there is still time for that) and other forms of “reactions.”

The COVID-19 pandemic makes it imperative that we focus on health. Will this affect your grantmaking activity in the areas of education and culture?

COVID-19 actually highlighted all kinds of weaknesses, all over the world and in all program areas of our activity, including the areas of Health, Education, Social Welfare, etc. So, we continue to try to do our best, to ultimately try to contribute where necessary, always within our capabilities.