Andreas Dracopoulos to The National Herald: If the Greek language is lost, then so are we

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Andreas Dracopoulos, Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), captivates you with his clarity of thought and his articulate language. It is rare—almost unheard of—to find in an interlocutor of this caliber, such an energetic and practical idealism and such a great willingness to help people, education, culture, arts and science. His effort to act ethically and responsibly has led him to see the present clearly and not through the colored glasses of ideologies.

For him, the fact that there are some who disagree is an encouraging sign, because it confirms what he aspires to be: a defender of freedom from despotism, a person responsible towards humanity and towards the truth.

By all accounts, Andreas Dracopoulos is a model of a man who moves unconventionally within conventional social forms, with principled virtue and a rare ethos, with good will, altruism, and the deep need not to remain silent in the face of lies and hypocrisy. His life and work are front-page news in newspapers and magazines and—more or less—most of you know about them. His contribution to education is enormous and his efforts to upgrade certain Greek schools in New York City demonstrate a sublime tolerance for a caste of people who regulate public affairs.

Through the recent Health Initiative, supported exclusively by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), with a budget exceeding $750 million and with a goal of strengthening the quality of health services for all, Andreas Dracopoulos still gives opportunities to the deniers of the evolution of the Greek diaspora to
reconsider their attitude, which he describes to us “with the flame of his heart that tries to make way for chaos and help the spirit to walk” (from *The Saviors of God* by Nikos Kazantzakis, p. 81).

*Mr. Dracopoulos, you always act based on fundamental axioms. Which ones do you consider most useful and apropos to the purpose you serve at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF)?*

I would say that there needs to be open access and quality in health and education. These are two very fundamental commodities; they are self-evident, I would say, and should not be fought for. It is imperative that the whole world should enjoy them. I believe in free markets, but on the other hand, there needs to be a social side in all of us. As you know, with the Foundation, we have now undertaken a major initiative regarding health, which is global and of course includes Greece, first and foremost. With this in mind, we will seek to ensure access to public health care for all. Education, an equally important issue, is even more difficult to approach because it is an area where politics, philosophies, and ideologies are involved and, in the end, one forgets what is at stake.

*Let’s get to the issue of the Greek diaspora. What are your assessments of the way Greek education and schools are treated?*

I think it’s a common secret among the Greek-American community what we “weren’t able” to do at Saint Demetrios, in Astoria. For me it was a very big disappointment on so many levels. Unfortunately, the way in which some people treated this effort had no reference to the growth and education of our children, resulting in the destruction of the only school that had the potential to develop it.

The group that was in charge at Saint Demetrios, with the exception of the director, Mr. Koularmanis, did not even understand what “endowment” means and why it is needed to lay a solid foundation for the school. We brought in people from Columbia, and from NYU, and we proposed a tremendous upgrade, not just financially, but also qualitatively, to kick-start a new beginning so that the school can be strengthened and not just survive, but help the kids who deserve it to get very far. It’s hard to believe that we have been to 136 countries and most of the problems we have faced are with the Greek diaspora. But life today is hard and fast-paced. When opportunities are presented, some take them and move forward, while others remain the same and are left behind.
Why did they refuse your grant?

We had proposed at that time to create an independent council at Saint Demetrios, as stipulated under section 501 of the Internal Revenue Code for nonprofits. The then dean of the Cathedral and Mr. Andriotis would remain on the council. Ms. Fleming, who was then provost at NYU, had already accepted, as had Mark Mazower of Columbia, a great philhellene. The idea was to draw up a proper contract with the right strategy for the future, with a $25 million endowment, and to lay a new foundation for education to move forward. This was destroyed from within, by those who were, at that time, in the school’s leadership. What we did was not only provide the financial assistance, but the proper infrastructure to open up and connect the school to a far superior educational environment, but it was slowly “eaten away” from within. That is the only truth. Under such conditions, even if someone were to come tomorrow and gift 100 million, it would go nowhere without the right people, the right philosophy, the right strategy and the long-term view, not only to create the building infrastructure, but to “mold” the children within it, with a Greek soul. If these things do not take place, our language will be lost and that will be the end of Greek education in New York as we knew it.

Therefore, in order to improve the situation in our schools, it is necessary for attitudes and various factors to change.

Of course. Everything starts from the right leadership, the right strategy, the right cooperation between schools, which are non-existent. We have a lot of schools that are stagnating, but each school individually does not accept to partner up with other schools. A few years ago, we had invited all of them, and we had asked them to agree to us, as a Foundation, making a donation, which would act as an umbrella for all the schools, for books, technology, and teachers. In the end, no one showed interest, because they don’t seem to understand that without the Greek language, there is no Greek education. I am adamant about that! If the Greek language is lost, then so are we. It is ironic to see other countries trying to imitate Greek education and us—who have it—ignoring it, by living only for today and by serving narrow interests, completely unaware of what our culture means.

Your experiences show bitterness and your hopes point to a bleak landscape for the future of Hellenism.

But, I’ve had more than one experience. At the Cathedral we helped initially with a very respectable amount for an endowment, because if you don’t have something to support you in difficult circumstances, you can’t go on, and you can’t make plans for the future.

So, this grant was used to pay for staff overtime. My children were also in evening school at the time and there were many people who tried, and still try, to do something good but are being “eaten up” by the system. The realization that I am
now making, as a citizen and not as a foundation leader, is sad and disappointing. They don’t care about education... and there is a much more serious problem than merely a lack of financial resources. When you’re offering a school $25 million, and some people don’t even know what an endowment is and other say “if I’m not getting the money in my pockets, why should I accept it?” (we’ve heard these words too), this means there is a lack of professional conscience, not to mention a lack of ethics. These are the thoughts that I have had, both as a private citizen and as the Co-President of a foundation that tries to offer the best, both to the motherland and to the Greek diaspora.

*Why do you love Greece?*

I consider myself and all Greeks very lucky to have been born into a Greek soul, and I fight for what I have experienced in Greece, how I grew up, how I became a man. I want our children to have exactly the same experience. I don’t want our language to be lost. It is an integral part of this whole experience. The Greek soul is unique and we must awaken it from its slumber, shake it up, and not just let it simply exist as a pilgrimage to the framed pictures of our heroic ancestors.