

National Hellenic Society's Heritage Greece: Changing the Lives of Students

By Arthur Dimopoulos

The National Hellenic Society (NHS) is a relative newcomer on the Greek-American scene. There are rumblings about NHS being a country club of the Greek American elite – NHS members do include leaders from Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood and Washington power circles – but the characterization is inaccurate. NHS is selective of who gets to be a member but not as a barometer of wealth. To the contrary, NHS members share something special beyond success: a profound appreciation of this bond of heritage that ties us to one another, abiding appreciation of our parents' and forbears' sacrifices and the values instilled in us – values serving as the wellspring of our success: philotimo, hard work, education and love. Love of heritage, family, of parea and country. Being Greek is about giving back: to family, community and society – hallmarks of NHS membership.

Passing on the legacy of our "Greekness" to our children and future generations in a world competing for our time is a challenge when viewed within the context of modern demographics and institutions not keeping pace with change. The statistics speak for themselves – the "community" we established will continue to evolve and within the next two or three generations will be unrecognizable.

There is nothing permanent, except change, said Heraclitus. Many lament change, while others embrace change as opportunity. Changes within the "community" are no different than those we see in life, especially in the business world. Icons like Kodak, RCA, and Blockbuster, yesterday's industry leaders, are no more. Compared those to Apple and Samsung, companies that embrace and thrive on change and sport a combined market cap over nearly \$1 trillion, three times Greece's GDP!

NHS looked upon Hellenic heritage with its many nuances, features, and benefits as a product and identified our prospective customers of the same as the next generation of progeny of American families with vary-



The smiling faces say it all: The National Hellenic Society's Heritage Greece 2014 was not only a resounding success, but

ing levels of Greek descent, several of which are totally detached from their Greek identity and the institutions once serving as rallying points.

The game-changer strategy NHS developed is branded as "Heritage Greece." It is a two-week cultural and educational immersion for college students of Greek-American descent. Students with exceptional academic credentials and an open mind and desire to find out more about their Hellenic roots and identity. The students are hosted by the American College of Greece (ACG), Europe's oldest and largest American styled university, located on a plush 65-acre campus on an Athens suburb hillside.

The Greek-American students are paired with an exceptional group of Greek student peers from ACG. Together, they share journey of and discovery learning from each other and from a staff of experts and professionals. Learning unfolds in non-traditional ways – classroom language classes are aug-

mented in the Plaka, Agora, Acropolis, Benaki and Nauplio museums. Cooking and dance classes coupled with tours of wineries, ancient sites and sailing regattas to the Saronic Isles. Early one morning, on the Isle of Poros, a large group of students took it upon themselves to attend early morning Liturgy at St. George's Church. The Priest and congregants were so stunned to see young people return to Church and enlisted three of the young men to serve as altar boys, even more stunned to see them know exactly what to do with precision practices long abandoned. The congregants begged the students to come to their homes for breakfast, some of the intangible benefits of Heritage Greece that leave lasting memories.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, 10 Stavros Niarchos Heritage Greece Scholars participated in this year's Program. The Niarchos Scholars and entire Heritage Greece class met with Stavros Niarchos Founda-

created fond memories and opened important paths for a life-long appreciation of Hellenic heritage.

tion officials in Athens and were led on a tour of the incredible new Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in Kallithea currently under construction. The Center will house Greece's National Library and Greek National Opera. The grant underscores the Niarchos Foundation's Commitment to youth, education and in building bridges. The NHS also received grant funding from the Elios Foundation in San Francisco for three Elios Foundation Scholars.

The Heritage Greece 2014 students were also paid surprise visits by two special guests, Bill Antholis, Managing Director of the Brookings Institution, and Despina Anastasiou, Dow Chemical General Manager of Greece & Cyprus. The students were given inspirational messages to ever excel at what they choose to do and stay connected with their heritage, one another and with Greece.

For Heritage Greece students, the journey continues beyond the trip back from Greece. Students are enrolled as part of

the Heritage Greece Alum Network, convening at a reunion in tandem with the NHS' annual event, Heritage Weekend and Classic held in early October at the Ritz Carlton in Key Biscayne, FL. Heritage Greece Alum from the previous five sessions gather with NHS members as the NHS continues to play a role in mentoring and advising them, grooming them to be ambassadors of Hellenic heritage. In turn, the students participate in NHS at the local level augmenting NHS local activities and efforts.

There is no question of the powerful and positive impact of Heritage Greece. For Greece, the Program is also a "win-win" as scores of students and their families have returned to Greece – some to study, others to visit long-lost relatives and to further explore their Greek roots. Leveraging the bonds made is just a matter of time. While the Heritage Greece students were in Athens, NHS member, and Dow Chemical Chair and CEO Andrew Liveris met with Greece's

Prime Minister Samaras, and the head of IBM Europe to announce the creation of an Information Delivery Systems Center creating many jobs for the next generation. A paradigm of "giving back," something worth instilling and passing on to the Heritage Greece family.

One student, Allie Weber of Indiana University, had this to say: "I never in a million years thought that I would get the chance to experience Greece in the way I was blessed to through Heritage Greece, let alone with other Greek students like myself. I've been asked more times than I can count 'how was Greece?' The only words I can find to answer this are 'life changing.'" "Heritage Greece was a chance to visit incredible historical sites, taste authentic Greek cuisine, and experience all of the things about Greece Yiayia and Pappou constantly regaled over, but also a to make lifelong friends. Though I was told the relationships made on a trip like this are unique, I had no idea what to expect. Having so much in common from the beginning coupled with sharing amazing experiences together, the 2014 Heritage Greece class quickly became my family. This program gave me an opportunity to experience amazing things – to better understand my culture, and connect with other students like myself. Heritage Greece was a once in a lifetime experience, and I couldn't possibly be more thankful to have been able to be a part of it. The first thing that I did when I got home was rearrange my schedule for the fall so that I could take Modern Greek. I am now officially enrolled in the introductory course. Without this program, I don't know that I ever would've taken the initiative to learn Greek. I don't know how I could repay NHS for this incredible gift – a gift of culture, experience, adventure, and most importantly, lifelong friendships."

For further information see: www.hellenicsociety.org/programs.

Arthur Dimopoulos is the Executive Director of the National Hellenic Society.

Prominent CA Politician Angelides Raises Awareness about Golden Dawn

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tion," he said.

Though he did not predict whether the threat is actually fleeting or long-term, Angelides said "we must take the view that the threat is real and dangerous until it has been eliminated. To effectively combat the scourge of neo-Nazism in Greece, it will require a full political and educational effort as well as economic reform and recovery, including an end to the devastating policies of austerity that have been imposed by the European Union on Greece."

Angelides is encouraged that as more Greek-Americans learn about Golden Dawn, they speak out against it. "I have been heartened by the fact that many Greek American leaders including Congress members Dina Titus, John Sarbanes, and Gus Bilirakis, and many other elected, civic, and business leaders, have spoken out strongly about the threat," he said. "I commend efforts like the Hellenic American student-led 'Oxi' campaign

(<https://www.hellenext.org/2014/05/say-no-to-the-neo-nazis-in-greece-a-student-led-campaign-2/>) to combat the pernicious threat of neo-Nazism."

AMERICAN POLITICS

Third parties in the United States do not have nearly the impact they do in other countries, such as Greece. And speaking of American politics, who –

besides Hillary Clinton, whom just about everyone mentions as an inevitable candidate – does Angelides see emerging in both major parties as candidates for the 2016 presidential race? "It is always difficult to predict the political future," he prefaced. "Each day, week, or month can bring dramatic change to the political landscape. But, clearly, if Hillary Clinton decides to run, she will be a formidable candidate. I have known Ms. Clinton for two decades and have no doubt she would make a strong and effective president." What about on the other side of the political aisle? "As of yet, I do not see any potential Republican nominees who stand out from the pack."

Though Angelides left California's Treasury in 2007, it is apparent from his command of the issues that he continues to keep a close eye on politics, both at home and abroad. He was not elected governor in 2006, but would he seek to run for office again? "I have been honored to have had the chance to serve the people of California and the nation in both elective and appointive public office," he said. "It was a privilege to serve as Treasurer and as Chairman of the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, which conducted the nation's official inquiry into the causes of the financial crisis that devastated our economy." With refreshing candor not often shared by those potentially seeking office, Angelides added

that "at the right moment and in the right circumstances, I would welcome the opportunity to return to public service, although I do not have specific plans at this time."

IMMIGRATION REFORM

Immigration is an issue that will likely be prevalent in both the 2014 midterm elections and in the presidential race two years later. It is a national issue, and certainly California, because of its size and geographical location, would probably be affected by immigration reform legislation as much as any other state, if not more so. What needs to be done to bring about immigration reform? "We are a nation of immigrants and a strong society and country in no small part due to the talent and energy that immigrants have brought to our shores for generations," Angelides began, he himself a recent descendant of immigrants on both sides of his family. "The current system needs to be reformed so that we have a system of legal immigration that works well for our nation's future. Over the decades, we have made changes to our immigration system to reflect changing conditions and we need to do so again. Unfortunately, bipartisan reform efforts have been stymied by a minority of hard line politicians who have been resistant to reasonable and thoughtful resolution of this issue. The stalemate must be broken for the good of our society and economy."



Angelides, seen here with current Secretary of State John Kerry, at a campaign rally for his 2006 run for governor of California. He didn't win, but might reenter the political fray "at the right moment and in the right circumstances."

GREEK ROOTS


Angelides' mother, Eleni (née Papadopoulos), was born and raised in Alexandria Egypt, where her parents had relocated following their flight from Smyrna in 1922. In 1949, Eleni "came to the United States in 1949 to pursue her education. My father, Gerasimos (Jerry), was born and raised in San Francisco. My yiayia on my father's side was born in Skala on the island of Cephalonia and came to the United States in 1920. My pappou, from the village of Paneriti, near Corinth, immigrated here in 1907, returning briefly to Greece to fight in the Balkan War of 1912.

"I consider myself lucky to have been raised in a family that has always been proud of our Greek heritage and that embraced the values of family, hard work, educational achievement, faith, and community that have defined Americans of Hellenic descent.

"I remain grateful to all the Greek-Americans around the country who supported me when I ran for and was elected as State Treasurer of California and when I was the Democratic nominee for governor. The support I received from my fellow Hellenes was truly remarkable and a source of inspiration to my family and me."



Phil Angelides, former CA State Treasurer and gubernatorial candidate is one of the more prominent Greek-Americans seeking to raise awareness about the emergence of the Golden Dawn Party.



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