

THE HELLENIC VOICE

The largest and most widely accepted English weekly dedicated to Hellenic Americans.

VOL. II No. 48

Periodical Postage Paid
at Worcester, MA

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2002

The Hellenic Voice™

\$1.00 PER COPY

Stateside academic program seeks peace, post-reunification programs for Cyprus



E. John Rumpakis presents a detailed packet on Portland State University's Peace Initiatives Program to Greek Cypriot President Glafcos Clerides May 7.

By STACIE N. GALANG
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PORTLAND, OR — All eyes are fixed on Cyprus these days.

Even students and faculty at Portland State University — seemingly a world away — where their burgeoning Peace Initiatives Program focusing on Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean have a wait-and-see attitude about events to come. Recent elections in Turkey, the country's desire to be considered for European Union membership and a looming December 12 deadline for peace talks between Greek, Turkish, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders have only intensified the gaze on a country divided since 1974.

Enter English-born Greek Cypriot Dr. Harry Anastasiou, who began teaching this fall as part of the Peace Initiatives Program and who has spent years developing peace initiatives in the region; Dr.

Birol Yesilada, a Turkish Cypriot who moved to the U.S. in 1974, PSU's endowed chair of Contemporary Turkish Studies and a European Union specialist; E. John Rumpakis, an underwriter for part of PSU's program and activist for Hellenic interests abroad through his work in organizations such as Ahepa's Cyprus and Hellenic Affairs National Committee; a receptive dean, PSU's Dr. Marvin Kaiser, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and finally, participating students.

The chemistry and timing could not be more right. The program boasts lofty ambitions and those involved hope to build on the peace-building work that has taken place thus far and to lay the groundwork for future leaders in the region.

"The idea is to institutionalize an educational process that promotes dialogue, rapprochement and peace," Anastasiou said.



E. John Rumpakis, Dr. Harry Anastasiou, Dr. Andrew Banis, 2001-2002 supreme president of Ahepa, and Dr. Marvin Kaiser participate in Inauguration ceremonies of Portland State University's Peace Initiatives Program at the Fulbright Building, located in the U.N. buffer zone in Nicosia, Cyprus, May 8.

"We aspire to bring together people from the two sides so they can actually work together," he said. "It's really a first in this respect because part of the problem that we have in Cyprus is that nothing has ever become institutionalized that is bi-communal."

To that end, the program has received funding for Fulbright scholars from the region to fund a Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot to study at the university. The scholars, whose study will include any academic program at the university, are expected to start Fall 2003, according to Kaiser.

Kaiser championed both professors for their international experience to the campus and students as well as their scholarship in peace building in the community and economic development.

"They're both wonderful role models about what it means to be both understanding but also people of action on behalf of peace and justice," he added. "In both cases, they have been so proud of their heritage but also the willingness to help us engage as a university in this quest to educate our students and to help bring peace to the region."

"We really are so excited about what we think are the possibilities for all of us as faculty and students and community members to come together for an important cause with the belief that we can make a difference by working together."

While Yesilada described the program as "literally in stage one," he said the shared vision for the program was basically bringing together Americans, Greeks and Turks from Cyprus as well as Greek and Turkey to pursue programs in civics and civic leadership education.

"We believe that the education of civics, to get it across to future generations, is very crucial," Yesilada said. "We're looking for projects on sustaining development and democratic consolidation. We don't like the term conflict resolution. We mean the establishment of democratic norms and institutions within the realm of basic European ideals to which all of these countries aspire."

Despite the program's novelty, Portland State students have been able to take classes by Yesilada since he started teaching there four years ago and with the addition of Anastasiou this fall, have increased options under the university's graduate program in conflict resolution studies. The program incorporates a number of disciplines including international studies, political science, psychology and sociology, according to Anastasiou.

Kaiser, who traveled to
continued on page 8

Stateside academic program seeks peace, post-reunification programs for Cyprus

continued from front page

Nicosia, Cyprus to kickoff the program alongside already existing initiatives in the region, has multifold expectations for the program, the first of which is to introduce students to international issues around peace and conflict resolution. He said the program was born of student interest foremost.

"We will [also] enhance understanding about Cyprus specifically but also about the relationship between Greece and Turkey and about issues generally in the Eastern Mediterranean," he said. "[Thirdly], our expectation clearly is that we will bring students here from Cyprus and from Greece and Turkey to be a part of our student body both to enhance understanding and to build relationships and for the students here."

Kaiser said he came away from his Cyprus experience with a real spirit of hope because of the individual efforts of so many participants "trying to build, tear down the barbed wire and to trust people on both sides of the island."

All the while, Rumpakis had been working behind the scenes. Four years ago as a representative of the local Greek community, he had participated in the initial interviews that brought Yesilada to the university.

"The university understood that

there was substantial concern by the Greek community concerning our sensitivity about revisionist history," he said.

With the addition of Yesilada, the university saw an opportunity to add to its portfolio of academic studies for conflict/resolution studies on the graduate level, Rumpakis said.

"So when I was invited once again to appear at their initial meeting, it became clear that the university was interested in enhancing and focusing their interest in Greece and Turkey," he said.

Rumpakis said he worked for about six months, three to four hours a day to bring Anastasiou to the university and create the Peace Initiatives Program. The result was the establishment of a program and the hiring of Anastasiou and the move of his family all within the span of seven months. The process can take as long as two years, according to Rumpakis.

"We have shepherded this all the way through," he said. "This is the exciting part of the story. There was so much cooperation between all of the parties and encouragement even from the Turkish chair that enabled this to become a reality in just a little over seven months."

Kaiser lauded Rumpakis' efforts.

"People like E. John Rumpakis are

real heroes in my mind because he has stepped up and said how can we create a new generation of children committed to peace and cooperation," he said.

Both Anastasiou and Yesilada, who interestingly knew each other through work in the region before PSU, agree that timing is everything for a Cyprus peace deal. Yesilada said he feared the failure by the EU to give Turkey a date to start accession could create a "diplomatic train wreck."

"If this opportunity is missed we may face a permanent division of the island," Yesilada said. "And there is a lot that falls on the EU, too."

Yesilada said he believed Turkey's desire to become a member of the EU is hemmed in more by economics than by anything else. The country needs a lot of time to stabilize its economy.

"As somebody who has been studying the EU for 20 years, not to give Turkey a date for accession is puzzling because for not giving the date is huge," he said. "This new election is a very good indication that they want accession."

Anastasiou said the onus lies on Turkey's new government and how effective it will be in practice. Officials from Turkey's newly-elected ruling party, led by Recip Tayyip Erdogan, met with Greek leaders November 18, and

agreed to the December 12 deadline.

The United Nations proposed a 137-page peace plan November 18 that would reunite the country with two equal states and a 10-month revolving presidency.

As for PSU's work Anastasiou said he is confident that they "can begin with a core of people from the two sides and we are confident that we will generate the support and enthusiasm to move forward and this is very timely now in view of the tremendous effort to bring Turkey and Greece together within the EU framework."

He called their vision long-term with aspirations into the distant future in light of the developments.

"It's very important to acknowledge finally that any solution needs to find the community prepared particularly the younger generation to render the solution sustainable," he said. "At all levels—citizens, institutions, parties, government — our work in a way is continuing in this direction. Part of the failure of the past has been the fact there has been no preparation by the two communities for symbiosis."

Anastasiou is optimistic but said he realizes more needs to be done.

"We are certain that there is as much work to be done before as after," he added.