

PEOPLE UNITED IN A COUNTRY DIVIDED

The bi-communal Cyprus Friendship Programme aims to create bonds of friendship and trust among the youth of the communities of Cyprus. It is modeled after a similar programme that operated with great success in Northern Ireland for 20 years and brought together more than 2000 teenagers from the Catholic and Protestant communities. In Cyprus the programme has been running for three years. Teenagers eligible to apply must be aged 15 to 18, must not be in the final school year and at least one of their parents must be Cypriot.

The basic characteristics:

Young people from the two main communities are chosen after a process of applications and interviews that are conducted by the bi-communal team of the programme coordinators.

This is followed by meetings of all the successful applicants where each teenager will select a teenager of the same gender from the other community with whom he/she believes they have common interests and can be very good friends.

During the summer every 'pair' will be hosted for one month (July) by a carefully selected family in the US. This family will live near other families that will be hosting other 'pairs' from Cyprus.

During their stay in the US, two to three times a week all the young people will be meeting together for various group activities many of which involve community service of various types.

In 2009 there were 20 teenagers who took part in the programme, in 2010 there were 18 and in the summer of 2011 the number rose to 60. For the summer of 2012 the aim is to raise the number even further.

Special elements of the programme:

The relationships of friendship and trust created between the teenagers are typically very strong. They begin to be formed a long time before they board the plane in July since the selection process is completed by March, it is strengthened during their month abroad and continues after their return to Cyprus.

The Cyprus Friendship Programme is not just a trip abroad for one month. The Cypriot coordinators of the programme organise activities and projects for the members all year round. For example, there are bi-communal presentations to mono-communal audiences in schools and youth centres in both communities. The teenagers have the opportunity to speak about their experiences to the mass media. These and other activities aim to spread the message that reconciliation is possible and that



these young people are living examples of this truth.

The families of each 'pair' also get connected with equally strong bonds. It is only normal that the parents of each teenager would be interested to meet the young person from the other community that their child has chosen to be roommates for one month. It is equally normal to have the wish to meet the family of this child. Very often the circle becomes bigger with grandparents,

uncles and aunts. There are typically many meetings of the two families in Cyprus even during the month when their children are in the US. It is therefore, no surprise that the motto of the programme is "People united in a country divided".

All the coordinators of the programme in Cyprus and the US offer their services on a purely voluntary basis. This also applies for the host families in the US who cover all the expenses of hosting the two teenagers.

The most important costs of the programme are the airline tickets and a health insurance package during their stay in the US. These costs are covered from donations from individuals or non-governmental organisations (for example the Rotary) who believe in the aims of the programme. There is also a contribution from the family of each Cypriot teen who takes part in the programme. The organisers believe that no teenager should be excluded from the programme because of family financial difficulties.

The Cyprus Friendship Programme does not get any financial support or is dependent on any political party or any government in Cyprus or abroad.

For further information:

Sarper Ince 0533-8409792
sarper_ince@hotmail.com

Nicos Anastasiou 99-498531
nicosiew@spidernet.com.cy



Elias Melas on his friendship with Behcet Zorba

Cold sweat. Moist hands. The first experience was mutual between potential members of the Cyprus Friendship Programme throughout the application and interview process last year in February-March - nerve-racking if I may speak so candidly. New faces, both Turkish and Greek Cypriot. Compatriots all fighting for the same cause; national reconciliation, both on a social and cultural level.

Behcet, my Turkish Cypriot partner, made clear his passion towards the just case. I realised we all strived for the same finish line.

He instantly stood out: outspoken and outgoing, gesturing and shaking hands; life of the party. Having already seen such a constructive relationship between the two of us, I neared him and realised I was talking to an alter-ego: he was just like me.

By the second meeting we decided to pair up. Facebooks were at once exchanged and it was easy to communicate.

Our families met initially at the meeting at the American



Academy in Larnaca. A sentimental bond and uncanny familiarity was built between all our respective siblings and parents; even those of different ages! My sister would at times watch over his twin toddler sister and brother and he, his brother and I grew accustomed to each other effortlessly; it has to be said.

Even during the month long stay in the States, we grew as brothers in arms would. Vexed each other, laughed in our mutual bedroom for hours each night, recited our childhood and pre-pubescent experiences. Then discussed more solemnly our (at times) contradictory takes on football and music; though I did have some music he enjoyed and my Ipod was esoterically dubbed his own as a result of his use of it being a lot more frequent than mine!

Even after our intercontinental and transatlantic endeavours, we still open up

our school curricula and schedules in order to spend a Sunday lunch with both families, in lieu of an unproductive stay-at-home day!

Through thick and thin, we've grown together and no doubt we'll only continue to blossom in the time continuum of our newfound brotherhood.

Bahar Ozbilgehan & Mary Messiou on their friendship



Are we really going to be able to bond with a person from the other community? Will we have common interests? On our first meeting all our concerns vanished as we couldn't even identify who was Turkish Cypriot or Greek Cypriot. In our meetings we talked about our communities' past and pain, realising that both communities were hurt. This widened our perspective and brought us closer.

'Pairing' was just like finding your soulmate. The programme did not only bring us together but our families as well. Our parents bonded instantly and even the language difference was trivial. They shared the same worries about sending their daughters away. Soon, worries were not the only thing that they shared. Our mothers shared recipes and talked about cooking, as our fathers talked football and played backgammon. America was a special experience for us, we visited different places and shared the same experiences. Our host family was very welcoming and treated us as if we were a part of their family. We created a unique relationship, a sisterhood that no one can take away.

When we came back to Cyprus, we wanted to share our special experience with others. Telling people about our hope for unity.

"It is no longer good enough to cry peace, we must act peace, live peace, and live in peace."

(Shenandoah proverb).

Thoughts on Cyprus Friendship Programme from England

Although we Cypriots in the UK are far behind the cooperation and contact that takes place on the island, relationships are beginning to blossom between Cypriots on a more local scale. My father's best friend, another Greek Cypriot, married a Turkish Cypriot in 2005. At first the marriage was frowned upon by both Turkish and Greek Cypriots. This was something that saddened me greatly, as people seem to have forgotten that before the disputes in Cyprus, Cypriots used to live as neighbours. Yet now they seem to assume the worst of the people who once were their friends. However, as time progressed, and we had the opportunity to create relationships with the Turkish Cypriots, we began to realise that we had much more in common than we once thought. Now they are not regarded by us as Turkish Cypriots, just as Cypriots and as our family.

Similarly, in the summer of 2011, my father took us across the Green Line to visit his birth home in Famagusta. Living in the house are Turkish Cypriots. Despite expecting an uncomfortable meeting with the family, they welcomingly greeted us into their house and instead of hatred, a friendship grew between our two families and a sense of understanding of the other's pain shared.

The work of the Cyprus Friendship Programme is inspiring for us Cypriots in the UK. It allows a chance for the communities to reunite and realise that friendships and understandings are possible and hence dissolve away the negative assumptions that Cypriots sometimes make about one another. It enables a chance for the communities of Cyprus to realise that we are all Cypriots and that we all share the same hope of freedom to live as neighbours, as friends, as we once did and can do in the UK.

Alexia Savva lives in London and is the same age as the school students on the Cyprus Friendship Programme.