


A new generation of peacemakers

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Cyprus teens hope to change their war-torn homeland, and they're taking important first steps in Lake Oswego



REVIEW PHOTO: VERN UYETAKE - Teenagers Selin Ozuslu and Anna Soteriou, who come from from the Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus, are staying with Terri and Craig Childress in Lake Oswego while they participate in the Cyprus Friendship Program.

Why can't the world get along as well as Anna Soteriou and Selin Ozuslu?

The teenage girls' warm friendship is remarkable, because they come from the Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus, which has been bitterly divided for decades between Turkish-speaking and Greek-speaking factions.

The girls are from both sides of the divide, which means that they've had to learn to trust each other during a month-long sojourn to the U.S. as part of the Cyprus Friendship Program.

"At the end of the day, we are all Cypriots," says Ozuslu, who is Turkish. "We should be called Cypriots. Young

people are the only people who can offer hope for this. With older people, there were so many of them who were caught in the war and many of their family members were killed."

Soteriou, who is Greek, says young people are more open to new ideas. "I think our generation will be the turning point," she says.

Cyprus Friendship Program is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating trust and understanding through interaction between divided peoples. "We must empower them to play a part in bringing peace to their nation," says area co-coordinator Jack Bradley. "We've got to assist them in lifting their voices in this cause."

The girls are preparing for their quest in Lake Oswego, where they are guests in the home of Craig and Terri Childress. Laughing, bubbly and as high-spirited as any two 16-year-old girls on an international adventure, they are filling their days with fun outings designed to help them become acquainted with America.

Some things they've loved, and some things have mystified them. Like baseball.

"When I went to a game, nothing happened," Soteriou says.

But their main objective is preparing themselves through the Cyprus Friendship Program to return home and make their plea for peace in the face of what will often be fierce opposition. Hate, the girls say, is a hard habit to break.

"From the first grade, we've been taught to hate," Soteriou says. "But I've changed the minds of my best friends."

The girls are being taught how to be effective communicators — the vivacious Soteriou wants to be an actress; Ozuslu began learning English as a little girl — and how to gain the skills they need to convince the young people

of Cyprus to look past decades of propaganda. The dividing line between the Turkish north and the Greek south is so great that cell phones don't work in both sections.

"Our people say, 'They stole our homes,'" Soteriou says, "but they don't see that people on the other side got kicked out, too."

The truth, the girls say, is that both sides are guilty of inflicting suffering and that both sides have suffered greatly.

"I believe we can change the whole situation," Ozuslu says. "I try to create a bond. I want my Turkish friends and Greek people to realize we are not different."

Trust games are part of the girls' training. It's not easy to close your eyes and fall backward, hoping that someone will catch you. But that's the kind of trust Soteriou and Ozuslu will try to instill when they return home.

An impossible goal? Maybe not, because leaders of both sides — Mustafa Akinci, president of Northern Cyprus, and Nicos Anastasiades, president of the Greek sector — have recently been reaching out with confidence-building measures that could lead to future peace.

"I'm hearing hope from my Cypriot friends for the first time," says Bradley, who originally became involved with the Cyprus Friendship Program because he thought he should do something that would make him a good citizen. However, his experiences with students like Soteriou and Ozuslu have so inspired him, he says, that "now I do this for myself."

His heart is with them.

"I desire and hope that these kids can be the hope for the future," Bradley says. "I hope they can throw off decades of racism and nationalism."

Two presidents can do much to achieve peace in Cyprus, of course, but so can two girls who have taken important first steps in the Childress home.

"At night sometimes," Terri Childress says, "I hear Anna singing to Selin to comfort her."

For more about the Cyprus Friendship Program, go to www.cyprusfriendship.org.

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