


A new generation of peacemakers

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Four Cyprus teens hope to change their war-torn homeland



These four teenage girls will be returning to Cyprus as both friends and peacemakers. From left: Jenny Patroclou, Joanna Chimarrides, Yasemin Ozant and Merve Onkaya.

Their names are Joanna, Yasemin, Merve and Jenny. The oldest of the four girls is just 18. But they have already chosen to accept the monumental task of bringing peace and unity to their native country of Cyprus.

“These girls are committed to being agents of change,” said Jack Bradley, area coordinator for the Cyprus Friendship Program, an 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. We’ve got to assist them in lifting their voices in this cause.”

Through CFP, the girls currently are staying with host families in Lake Oswego. On Monday, they brought their message to the Lake Oswego Rotary Club, where they talked about a fear-fractured world most Americans could not begin to imagine — and how they intend to change it.

“It’s my duty as a youth to do something about this,” said Jenny Patroclou, 17. “It is a very difficult battle fighting for peace, but it’s easier for us as young people than it is for older people who have experienced so much pain. We should be proud of how much we achieve.”

The Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus has been bitterly divided for decades between Turkish-speaking and Greek-speaking factions, separated by a United Nations peacekeeping force that struggles to keep turmoil and hatred in check. The girls are from both sides of the divide, which means that they’ve first had to learn to trust each other during their month-long sojourn in the U.S.

Ioanna Chimarrides, 18, said she was very close to being drawn into the same sectarian hatred that has divided her country for decades.

“I grew up in an environment full of hate,” she said. “I was told, ‘They (Turkish speakers) took everything.’ I heard that at church, school and everywhere. If not for my parents, I would fanatically hate the other side.”

Chimarrides also understands what it feels like to be hated. She is half German, and Greek-speaking Cypriots have terrible memories of the Nazi occupation of Greece during World War II. But that only makes her want to fight harder.

“I’ve been told, ‘All Germans are bad,’” Chimarrides said. “Like I’m the one to blame. I tell them, ‘Look at me! Am I bad?’ Achieving peace will be difficult. It will take a lot of time and patience.”

Chimarrides has already started that journey through CFP, where she has become friends with Merve Onkaya, 17.

“We have to risk putting trust in each other,” Chimarrides said. “Now I’m sure I can trust Merve.”

For Yasemin Ozant, the youngest of the group at 16, forgiveness is the vital element for building peace.

“Peace makes me happy,” she said. “I feel better. We can’t change the past, but we can change the future. So often I hear, ‘We lost businesses, we lost houses, we lost relatives, we lost friends. We lost everything.’ Older people still feel the pain. But forgiveness is very important to me as a young peace builder. Without forgiveness, there will be no peace.”

In Lake Oswego, the four girls have been practically bathed in love, hospitality, admiration and support. Their hosts include Curt and Gabi Kirkemo, Skip and Sandy Barnhardt, and Burt and Rosalie Czapszys.

When Curt Kirkemo was asked what Yasemin and Jenny were like, he practically exhausted the list of superlatives in describing them. But CFP’s Bradley noted that back in Cyprus, the girls will face crowds who will be dubious and perhaps even hostile. They could certainly lose friends because of their stand for peace.

The girls say they are ready for the challenge. In fact, Onkaya sounds downright feisty about it.

“I want to make every single person jealous of us being in this program,” she said. “I’m going to post every picture I took.”

Chimarrides said she hopes that at least some people will listen.

“Maybe we’ll have to repeat it a dozen times,” she said. “We won’t give up.”

Ozant said she’ll talk about “how close I became to my friends here. We shared our food, clothing, everything. We’re not that different from each other.”

“I hope I don’t lose friends,” Patroclou said. “Bit by bit, I think they’re becoming more open-minded. I now have friends who actually support me.”

If some people yell out insults during one of her talks, Patroclou said, “I’ll ask them to listen to themselves. I’ll tell them so much of this has been going on for years.”

Is peace in Cyprus an impossible dream? Chimarrides, Ozant, Patroclou and Onkaya aren’t going back home to only dream about peace. They will be working to achieve it. Giving up is not part of the plan.

As Patroclou movingly put it, “Maybe I won’t see peace in my lifetime. Maybe my children won’t see peace. But I think you’re going to see the day when there is peace in Cyprus.”

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

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