

Cypriot youth aspire for peace, unity

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Program — Teens Savvas Stavrinou and Cem Yirik come to Oregon to tour, train with Cyprus Friendship Program

When Mike and Amy Caruso toured Cyprus in 2012, they saw firsthand the deep cultural and political divisions in the country, which has been separated by a patrolled United Nations buffer zone since 1974.

Traveling with Portland State University professor Birol Yesilada, who hails from the Turkish and Muslim portion on the northern side of the island nation, the stark divide became even clearer when traveling through a checkpoint that controlled access to Greek and Christian territory.

That's why they elected to participate in the Cyprus Friendship Program, which brings teens from each side of the country together on a four-week tour of the United States, where they will build friendships and train to bring peace and unity to their country.

"It really hit home when we went through the checkpoint, when we had to show our passports to get through the buffer zone, which is sometimes referred to as the green zone or the dead zone," Mike Caruso said. "Then it really hits you that people do have separation problems, anxiety and a lot of tension. We're hopeful that things are improving and this is one small way in which we can help."

The Dundee couple have been hosting Savvas Stavrinou, who hails from the Greek side, and Cem Yirik, who lives in the north.

"The bonding you see over just four short weeks is amazing," Caruso said. "It's very powerful. The commitment we see in the kids is also very strong."

Both students were first drawn to the program, based on the successful Children's Friendship Project for Northern Ireland, because of the trip to the United States, but quickly identified with the goal of the program. Once paired together, it didn't take long to realize they weren't as different as they had been led to believe.

"We like the same music, we both like adventure and trips abroad," Stavrinou said. "Any small thing that teenagers might discuss, we can discuss those things. When I say something, he has something to add to it. We can engage in a discussion. It's not like we're so different we can't talk about anything."

In addition to receiving training in peacemaking, the 60 Cypriot students in this year's cohort have participated in activities, like a ropes course, that facilitate bonding and friendship.

Stavrinou and Yirik accompanied Caruso to a meeting of Newberg Noon Rotary Club, of which he is a member, to give speeches about how they see the future of their country.

Caruso said that Rotary has participated in the program all five years that it has operated in Oregon and that Newberg area families have also hosted every year in that span.

Yirik's address focused on forgiveness, stressing that holding on to grudges and grievances will only increase the divide between people on both sides, while Stavrinou highlighted the role of understanding.

"We need to understand that we both had problems during the war and the years after," Stavrinou said. "It's not only our side that we must consider. It's both. We both experienced pain and we can't be selfish and see only our side or that I'm right. I wasn't the only one who was hurt and I don't have the right to be hostile towards them."

Both students plan to stay in touch once they return home and expect to field a lot of questions from friends and family, but they hope to change the hearts and minds of their friends and families by introducing them to their new friend so that they will see for themselves there is no reason to fear or vilify them.



SETH GORDON - Fostering peace - Dundee couple Mike and Amy Caruso hosted Cypriot teens Cem Yirik (center left) and Savvas Stavrinou as part of the Cyprus Friendship Program, which takes students from the Turkish and Greek sides of the divided island nation on a tour of the United States in order to foster friendship and peacemaking skills.

The students, who communicate to each other in English because they do not speak one another's native language, are hopeful that the program can play a role in changing their country for the better.

"Let's face it, we're the future," Stavrinou said. "If we learn the truth and form our own opinion, not just adopt what other people say or general opinion or what's heard in the streets, it affects us in a positive way and we can do whatever we can to make things better."