

Through Cyprus Friendship Programs teens are coming together

Viki Eierdam/ for The Reflector | Posted: Wednesday, August 6, 2014 9:00 am

The vast majority of the known world is aware of the division within Korea and Vietnam but there is another, possibly lesser known, country that is also the only country in the world to have, within it, a divided capital.

The Cyprus Friendship Program (CFP) is working to change the way Cypriots from the north (referred to as Turkish-Cypriots) and Cypriots in the south (referred to as Greek-Cypriots) see one another and approach each other. The hope is to raise up a generation that will collectively refer to themselves as Cypriot – not making any designation based on geographic residence or upbringing within their country.

Now in its sixth year, CFP pairs teens from 15-17 years old from the north and south of Cyprus through social gatherings in their country, and then brings a group of paired students to the United States for one month and supports their re-entry home as they commit to continuing and expanding on their friendship with “the other.”

A program with such far-reaching possibilities has a stronghold in North County. On July 1, 16 teens arrived at the Portland International Airport and they resided in Battle Ground, Portland, Newberg and Salem until August 5.

Once each week, they all got together with their host families and extended family to participate in an activity – whether it be a barbecue, volunteer activity with Mercy Corp International, trust-building exercise like the rope challenge course at the Oregon Episcopal School or learning about other historical cultural shifts through a weekend intercultural exchange with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs at Kah-Nee-Ta.

While in the U.S., the pairs are also required to share a room and participate in all day-to-day activities with their host families.



CYPRUS FRIENDSHIP PROGRAM

LOREN AND LISA JONER hosted the entire Cyprus Friendship Program group at their home just a few days after their arrival in the United States. George and Ahmet are seated in the third row, the third and fourth from the left. Photo courtesy of Donald Q. Smith

Over the last three years, the Battle Ground and Lewis River Rotary clubs have taken a strong interest in CFP and have been opening their doors to Cypriot teens, receiving as much as they give.

According to Sue Coates, a long-time member of the Lewis River Rotary and former assistant governor of the Clark County region for Rotary, the Portland metro area is one of only five cities in the United States selected to participate in the CFP host program and the only one on the west coast. She credits two Turkish and Greek Cypriot professors at Portland State University, who are both colleagues and friends, as part of the reason for the inclusion.

Loren and Lisa Joner are hosting George Sidiropoulos and Ahmet Ince this summer while their 21-year-old son, Zach, and 19-year-old daughter, McKenzie, are in their homeland of Cyprus. While CFP is not an exchange program, the Joner family was so affected by their participation last year that their children expressed a great interest in traveling to Cyprus so Zach and McKenzie are spending two weeks with Neo's family in southern Cyprus and Yajis's family in northern Cyprus.

Neo and Yajis were the two boys who stayed with the Joners in 2013. An added bonus is that, while in Cyprus, Zach and McKenzie have been able to spend an evening with George and Ahmet's families, as well. Loren said that it goes a long way in building trust to have their children in Cyprus while American families are caring for Cypriot teens.

"Our family continues to be dedicated to trying to resolve the lack of peace in Cyprus in the small ways that we can ... Unlike other places in the world, there's not a lot of high profile death or conflict but it's a divided country," Loren said.

That's not to say there hasn't been bloodshed.

"I lost many of my family members in the civil war of '74," Ahmet said. "My family wanted me to join this program (CFP). Elders saw the war but we didn't see it. (We want to) build peace from youngsters to bring us to peace."

According to Ahmet and Foster, Cyprus was under British rule until the 1960s when they decided to pull out, causing two different groups to rise up in conflicts that turned violent. The attempt was to assume control over an island which is known as a gateway to the Middle East and takes three hours to drive around.

Ahmet talked about the "buffer zone" and "no man's land" but he also talked about PeacePlayers International, which is a nonprofit organization that focuses on communities in conflict, using basketball to promote peace. Through PeacePlayers, Greek and Turkish Cypriots compete around the world. Cypriot youth not interested in joining CFP are at least encouraged to support their efforts to create country-wide unity toward peace.

George shared that there's a Greek saying "Den éinai to pós nomízete óti éinai," which means "It's not how you think it is." With wisdom beyond his years, George went on to explain what he saw in teens who'd come back from the States after participating in the CFP program and his own experience opening himself up to Turkish Cypriot friends.

"Everyone thinks Turks are like terrorists or something," George said. "I truly think they're (Turkish Cypriots) not what we think or what we're taught they are. The elders of our generation lived the war. When someone invades your country, I don't think you think kindly of them. Coming here helps you see it's not how it seems or how they tell you it is and that's a huge advantage that not many people will (have)."

There's been levity mixed with self-discovery and conflict-resolution classes. In Kah-Nee-Ta, Ahmet found out salmon is one of the most amazing foods. "You have to try it," he insisted to anyone who hasn't.

George pulled out his guitar around a campfire one night and discovered a bond that breaks down cultural barriers when he was soon surrounded by 50 people, CFP participants and strangers alike.

"It was an amazing thing for me because I was playing so, yeah, out of Kah-Nee-Ta, apart from information on Native Americans, that was a huge surprise," George said.

Ahmet plays guitar, as well. Before coming to the U.S. they looked into peace-through-music programs. But, after their Kah-Nee-Ta experience, it's forefront in their minds to research when they return home to Cyprus.

Loren summed up what CFP is all about.

"The ability to have a global influence from a small community is perhaps underestimated and, really, the entire process of building peace is most often affected by grass roots efforts. To be able to be in Battle Ground and be a part of something happening almost on the other side of the globe is a humbling and wonderful experience," Loren said.

To host a paired teen or for more information on the Cyprus Friendship Program, go to www.cyprusfriendshipprogram.org.