

Friendship reaches across borders for two Cypriot teenagers

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Two Cypriot teens live with Tigard host family during month-long stay for the Cyprus Friendship Program, hoping for peace in their own country



TIMES PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Nogay Dalkilinc and Voris Sarris are from two different sides of Cyprus, but have discovered through the Cyprus Friendship Program that they have a lot in common.

At home, on the island of [Cyprus](#) near the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, a border wall separates their lives.

But here, while visiting the United States, two 17-year-old Cypriots from different sides of that wall are able to sit side-by-side on a couch in Tigard. Here, they're able to make friendships that might have formed on Cyprus if only history had unfolded differently.

Indeed, after 41 years of separation on Cyprus, it's teenagers like these who might just be the answer to rebuilding peace and unity in their country.

"Over the years, you just get used to the situation. You

have a country that is smaller than it should be, and you're just used to that," said Voris Sarris, a teen from the southern and Greek-speaking part of Cyprus. "The thing is, we are both Cypriots and we're living apart. That's the bad thing."

"Our culture is similar," added Nogay Dalkilinc, Sarris' northern-living and Turkish-speaking counterpart. "You get used to it, but when you realize you are so (much) like them, you just want to get together and live together."

For centuries, Greek and Turkish Cypriots did live as neighbors. They went to the same schools, attended the same events and married one another. But in 1974, after a Greek coup and a Turkish military invasion, the country entered a forced division; Turkey claimed the northern half of the country and Greece the south, forcing many Cypriots out of their homes and onto one side of the "Green Line" — a border that remains standing today — or the other. Though Cyprus is technically one country, it's operates as two different entities.

"Different books, different language, different countries," Dalkilinc said. "We learn completely different things."

In addition to different histories, the separation also brought intense prejudices and stereotypes about the other side — stereotypes claiming the other as lesser, dirty and non-human. These barriers are what the [Cyprus Friendship Program](#) hopes to break down, with the idea that the physical wall might someday be torn down, too.

Launched in 2009, the year-long Cypriot program takes 60 teenagers (30 from the north, 30 from the south) and partners each of them with someone from the other side. They attend meetings and workshops for months, then spend a four-week stint in the United States where they live together with a host family.

"I learn more than they do," said Marland Henderson, a Tigard City Councilor and the host father to Sarris and Dalkilinc. "It's just great and I'm glad to be a part of this."

For the Cypriot teens, being part of this program ultimately means being part of something much larger. It means not only discrediting the prejudices they grew up hearing, but sharing what they learn with their friends and family at home. It means starting the conversation and working together to figure out how to move forward. It means understanding that at the bottom of it all, they're all Cypriots.

"We didn't believe ourselves that we are Cypriots, an independent nation, an independent country," Sarris said. "We were like our mother countries, Greece and Turkey."

"We didn't know who we are for many years," added Dalkilinc. "Are we Cypriots or are we Turks? Are we Cypriots or are we Greeks? Who are we? What is our culture? What language do we talk? We never feel like we have an island that is ours. Now, we feel like this is our place."

This change comes during a time when more Cypriots appear to be pushing for peace. Recently, a prime minister with a peaceful agenda was elected on the north side, something that gives hope to young people such as Dalkilinc and Sarris following years of more antagonistic leadership.

Yet while they're hopeful, Dalkilinc and Sarris know that plenty of struggles lie ahead as they embark on the road to unity. And as part of their participation in CFP, upon returning home, the pair will go out into each other's communities, promoting togetherness and beginning difficult conversations with people who may not want to listen.

"The thing that I appreciate the most is realizing how much these young people have to say, and realizing how important they are to all of our futures, whether it be in Cyprus, or whether it be in the United States, or whether it be any place," said Jack Bradley, Portland resident, host parent and Cyprus Friendship Program Area Coordinator for Oregon and Southwest Washington.

The Cypriot teens do have a lot to say. Though they don't speak the same native language, they find common ground through English and pose ideas that many teens have likely never considered. Their thought processes come partly from necessity, but are also born out of hope and the harsh reality that not all Cypriots want peace.

"My family was always peaceful — they were always peaceful. But after I attended this program, my father told me that 'Now, I'm hopeful about the whole process,'" Dalkilinc said. "I really wanted to get accepted to this program to show my friends that are not so friendly to south side. I wanted to show them that if I can live in the same room with my friend, why we can't live in the same neighborhood? Or same house?"

Though many countries rely upon the hard work and ideas of adults to make changes, in Cyprus, it's the youth who've taken on much of that responsibility. It's the same youth who play basketball and soccer and write songs. It's the same youth who are in high school, still deciding where they want to go to college. It's the youth who weren't even alive in 1974 when conflict broke out, but want to create a brighter future anyway.

"That's a really wrong move by the elders ... they have to act mature and have to act differently. They cut their bonding with their teenage self. That's really bad; that's a challenge," Sarris said. "Teenagers, they are just themselves before they get into the real world. When you're a kid, a teenager, you see the world really differently."

And when they get home at the end of July, Sarris and Dalkilinc hope to help others see the world — and their country — a little bit differently, too.



TIMES PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Nogay Dalkilinc and Voris Sarris have come to Tigard for the summer through the Cyprus Friendship Program, which aims to build bridges between Turkish and Greek Cypriots.





TIMES PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Nogay Dalkilinc and Voris Sarris pose with their host parents, Marland and Marilyn Henderson, in Tigard.



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