

Fostering bonds among youth

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A circular from the Ministry of Education and Culture endorsed the efforts of the Cyprus Friendship Programme (CFP) at the beginning of the year, a move which has seen the programme's aspiration escalate, and its number of annual participants increase.

"The Cyprus Friendship Programme has objectives that are consistent with the aims of the Ministry of Education and Culture; for strengthening the peaceful settlement of disputes, to develop respect towards diversity, to combat violence and promote the culture of peace in general," signed Dr Kyprianos D. Louis, Director of the secondary schools department and Dr Elias Margadjis secondary technical and vocational education department.

Modelled on the Children's Friendship Project for Northern Ireland (CFPNI), a peace and friendship-building programme that successfully brought more than 2000 protestant and catholic teens together throughout its 21 years of existence, CFP has been working towards instilling a culture of peaceful coexistence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots since 2009.

Founded on the initiative of HasNa, a small US non-profit organisation in cooperation with a bi-communal team of Cypriot coordinators has been creating bonds of friendship and trust among the youth of both communities.

It does so by recruiting teens from both communities and 'pairing' them (one Greek Cypriot and one Turkish Cypriot), with the aim of both teens to be hosted under one roof by a family in the US for four weeks, during the month of July.

"I've seen the programme grow and I've seen the results in teens which is beyond words... I've seen children before and after... They develop confidence, leadership qualities, they want to do better in their lives, they become lifelong friends," attests Sotia Adamidou, Greek Cypriot Principal Coordinator of the programme.

Defining the thorough procedures applicants go through before being accepted into the programme, including

interviews, a series of meetings with facilitated workshops, activities and focus on leadership, communication, reconciliation and peace-building techniques, Adamidou is quick to place the relationships created amongst the youth, but also their families, at the forefront.

“Relationships and friendships are formed long before they board the plane to the US. The families of both pairs also get connected with equally strong bonds, they meet during different functions, they sit around tables and share experiences, they have sleepovers and really get to know each other,” explains Adamidou.

“And then, each pair lives with host families, sharing a bedroom to themselves for four weeks... They experience a country where many different cultures and religions live together in peace and build further bonds with their host families... There is a third dimension to their experience,” adds Adamidou.

“They become friends with Turkish Cypriots (and vice versa) and a lot of the teens had never met people from the other community until they came to the programme... when they return they also share their experiences here; I think that’s what we want, because even if there is a solution, which I hope there will be, if the people themselves are not ready to embrace a solution... it has to start from there,” says Adamidou.

She reveals that the accepted age range is from 15-to 18-year-olds so as to make sure they continue to share their experiences within school environments, too.

Both the coordinating team and hosting families work on a voluntary basis, with Airline tickets and health insurance packages covered from donations from individuals or non-governmental organisations, notably the Rotary, along with contributions from participants’ families.

On location, youth are sent to various areas of the US, including San Francisco, Portland, Maryland, Oregon, new Hampshire, Virginia, with each area hosting five or six pairs in different homes depending on the number of applicants and hosting families.

To date, 343 teens have ‘graduated’ from the programme, with 64 teens scheduled to travel to the US in July.

“To further advance leadership and peace building, teens plan activities which they do when in the US. Through a formal programme of activities in the residential country, participants go through team building activities, conflict resolution training, community service, civic engagement and environmental projects to name a few,” concludes Adamidou.

Summer in the States

Speaking to an alumna of the programme, 17-year-old Tania Kapodistria, notions of the experience come through as she attempts to recall the experience she had back in the summer of 2015.

“Thanks to The Cyprus Friendship Programme, I had the honour and privilege of travelling to neutral grounds, in America, for a month,” says Kapodistria.

“I was amongst the 10 teenagers being temporarily hosted in the state of Maryland along with my pair Sevgi. She lives in the northern part; sharing this experience with her impacted my life immeasurably,” she adds.

“When we arrived in the Uni-ted States we were welcomed with open arms. Our stay was split between two host families, each for two weeks. Not only did Sevgi and I learn more about each other’s cultures, but we had the chance to witness first-hand how Cyprus differed from America, and how similar they can be in certain respects,” she says.

“Over the course of the four weeks, we spoke at local churches as well as participated in various team-building activities to strengthen our bonds in the Maryland group.

“We spent a day teaching the art of peace to underprivileged children attending a peace camp called ‘Little Friends

For Peace' and even had extra time which we dedicated to sightseeing and establishing a connection with the other members of our group," says Kapodistria.

"During the first couple of pairing meetings prior to our departure, an immediate friendship sparked between Sevgi and me. That friendship only thrived and flourished in the kind of situation that we were in. We started off as strangers but returned to Cyprus as sisters. Every teenager's experience with their pair is unique; however I feel I can speak for most, or all, of the participants when I say the people you are with become your second family."

Mikaella Karaiskaki, 18 years old, also shared her experience. "I personally was intrigued by the programme's objective approach and decided to apply as, up until then, I knew no one from the other side, and I desperately wanted to visit the home of my refugee Greek-Cypriot grandparents. I was selected and introduced to my pair Zubeyde, a lovely, fierce and intelligent Turkish-Cypriot girl with whom we immediately connected," says Karaiskaki.

"To begin with, you learn to respect and value the opinion of other fellow students. This was encouraged through our meetings where we discussed issues with regards to philosophy, ethics and problem solving."

"Emphasis was given to achieving cooperation, coordination and unity among the members of our team in order to accomplish the various tasks and activities that we would face later on. That is the essence of this programme, to promote the synergy and collaboration of Turkish and Greek Cypriots in an unbiased environment, through which we have the ability to liberally express our personal views and have them discussed with fellow compatriots," explains Karaiskaki.

"Above all, I made friends, I had fun and I acknowledged the main idea of CFP: we are able to co-exist with Turkish Cypriots despite our varying political and religious views," she concludes.