

A Link Between: Adventure, Philanthropy, Youth, History, Belief and Hellenic Culture

The following is a story of how a team from Greece and the Diaspora helped reopen a 720 year old church, built using columns from a temple erected 1900 years earlier (2600 years ago) on the Greek island of Kythera.

By John Fardoulis

When questioning residents around the nearby village of Mitata in Kythera during July this year, no one really knew when liturgy was last held in Agios Kosmas, a small Byzantine church which sits on a mountain side, where the ancient capital of Kythera once stood.

John Prineas, a Kytherian-Australian who attended the family's horafia on the local hillside in the 1940's - said that there was no talk of any service in Agios Kosmas in living recollection at that time.

Hence we came up with the assumption that liturgy hadn't been conducted in Agios Kosmas for around 100-150 years.

A team of local residents, university students from Athens and volunteers from the Diaspora (particularly Australia) worked on the island for 18 days in July this year, as part of a team that supported archaeologists from the Greek Ministry of Culture in excavations that rediscovered parts of the ancient, Laconian-controlled capital of Kythera.

An adjunct to this project was creating a walking path through inhospitable scrub, previously blocking access to Agios Kosmas, reopening the small but magical church to the public. It's not uncommon for Byzantine churches to be constructed where older Pagan temples and sanctuaries once stood, usually because they occupied strategic locations, and to overshadow a previously rival religion.

The project helped prove a lot of things to the community, especially how when unbridled (perhaps slightly crazy) enthusiasm is combined with a good cause, almost anything's possible. So the quest to bring life back to Agios Kosmas began. Local Kytherian farmers Jimmy Galakatos and Kostas Moulos rose to the challenge, as the front men who fought their way up the 'agrio' mountain, armed with chainsaws that tamed

the previously dominant agathia and suffocating bushes.

Archaeology students from Athens and Greek-Australian youth followed in their wake, throwing branches out to the sides of the path, clearing a walking trail that later saw hundreds of people ranging from 8-year-old children to 85-year old grandparents venture up the mountain in the weeks that followed. None of this was for money, everyone volunteered their time and sweat. And it was worth it!

A visit to Agios Kosmas is doubly historic - being able to see inside a 720 year-old church exuding a special ambience, cool, dimly lit, with decaying hagiography on the walls from the 1300's. The church also stands where the island's ancient capital functioned nearly two thousand years earlier, using ancient 600 BC Doric columns to hold up the roof.

Contemporary Australia is only a little more than 200 years old, we don't have 720 year-old churches here, and as relatively new migrants, most Greek-Aus-

tralian don't have ties that go back more than seventy years in this new land. But in Greece, a wide range of civilizations have either ruled or visited over the last 5000 years, with many Greek-Australians now inheriting plots of land engulfing priceless remnants of the past.

Not Just Discovering, but Creating History

During the three week stay in July, our team got to know Kythera's Metropolitan, Bishop Seraphim and local priest Father Yiorgios on a practical basis - due to hospitality offered by the Kytherian Archdiocese, in allowing 25 full-time volunteers to stay in a beautiful 170-year-old monastery, Agia Moni. This built rapport, which led to collaboration on a cultural and religious level, working together to stage the first church service in Agios Kosmas for 100-150 years.

The historic reopening of Agios Kosmas took place on July 29th, 2010 when Bishop Seraphim and regular church goers were joined by a new generation of 'neolaia', in a beautiful church service on the Paleokastro mountaintop. Life and energy was injected.

There's an important lesson to learn here. Attending church is one thing, but working together on volunteer projects helps build a deeper rapport, and can unify volunteers from around the world, which was the case for our team in July this year.

Going beyond discovering new elements of history... was the opportunity to actually create it - staging the first service at Agios Kosmas in well over 100 years. As you can see from photos, it was truly a magical experience. Culture in action. The service was a moving experience and if you closed your eyes, your mind could have drifted back a thousand years.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

When farewelling Bishop Seraphim the day before returning to Australia, he



suggested that we open up two more currently inaccessible churches next year, bringing life back to other historic places of worship. A great way to combine a Greek-island holiday with a dash of adventure, physical activity and in creating life-long memories. The concept is worth discussing across all Greek-Australian brotherhoods and committees here in Australia, imagine if teams could be formed to open access to old churches that are currently cut off in other parts of Greece.

Similarly, we found that volunteering on an archaeological dig helped spark people's imagination and formed a greater connection with their Hellenic heritage, in a very special way. Searching for objects from the past had a universal appeal - to both intellectuals and those with shorter attention spans, especially youth who get bored with old history books.

That's a point to remember. How else can you learn about ancient Greek history, without reading books? Well on-the-job, actually searching for new evidence, which ironically could lead to new chapters of history being written. The Greek archaeologists that we helped were great, patiently explaining the excavation process and teaching us about the significance of ancient artefacts found.

You see a lot of young fans showing





Hellenic pride at certain soccer matches in Australia, imagine if these young people were given the opportunity to help reopen 500+ year-old historic churches or dig up 2000+ year-old artefacts while on holidays in Greece? Participating in Hellenic adventures of consequence.

Obviously such projects need to be conducted under the supervision of trained archaeologists or other experts, where artefacts are handed in, conserved and exhibited in museums, but the process is still as thrilling as if you got to keep finds. A chance to live the dream and do good.

More on Agios Kosmas

Agios Kosmas is quite unassuming externally. Even though pieces of stonework from over 2500 years ago have been used in building part of its walls, an untrained observer won't realise that. Inside, the church is quite magical, with a mysterious ambience. Impressive icons from 1300's are painted on the walls, plus something even more special – using columns from approx 1900 years earlier, as part of the load bearing structure.

Agios Kosmas was built in the vicinity of an ancient Pagan temple, which some say was the temple of Aphrodite, a goddess closely associated with Kythera. It's built on an ancient site, reusing Doric columns from a much older temple but doesn't relate to Aphrodite as Heinrich Schliemann thought in the 1800's. Evidence found over the last decade has linked the Doric columns inside Agios Kosmas with a temple to the Dioskouroi, Castor and Pollux - worshiped by Laconian inhabitants in Kythera during the Classical period (500BC-100AD).

Community Backed Archaeology

Archaeology is far from new in Greece, but what was new, is the inclusion of the local community and members of the Diaspora in the project, both as sponsors and beneficiaries. Perhaps the term 'Community Backed' Archaeology is most appropriate.

A lecture outlining the concept of Community Backed Archaeology, perhaps sparking similar initiatives in other parts of Greece, plus a presentation of what the team discovered while excavating parts of Kythera's ancient Laconian-controlled capital will be held at Sydney University on the evening of Wednesday November 10th. 7pm for a 7.30pm start. Bring your friends and children along.

It's an interesting story, about more than just 2000 year-old artefacts but a way of unifying the community on many levels, engaging youth and providing a connection to ancient Greek heritage.

Perhaps you'd like to join the team as a volunteer next year? Come along and find out how.

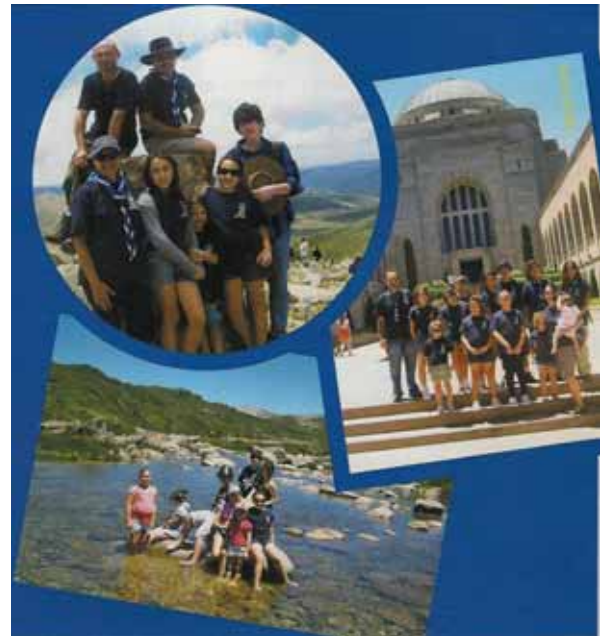
Call George Poulos from the Kytherian Association of Australia on 02 9388 8320 for more information. Or contact Kathy Samios on 02 9349 1849 or e-mail john.fardoulis@gmail.com to reserve your place at the free lecture.

This project was graciously supported by the Nicholas Anthony Aroney Trust and Kytherian Association of Australia. The lecture is being sponsored by Laiki Bank and presented in conjunction with the Sydney Friends of the Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens.

Group Adventures and News

6th Bankstown Conquers Kosciusko

During the Christmas break the 6th Bankstown Greek Scout Group organised a 4 day visit to Canberra and the Snowy Mountains. Leaders, Scouts, Cubs and their families were all invited to attend. In Canberra we visited the War Memorial, Questacon and Cockington Green Gardens. The highlight of the trip was the two days spent in the Snowy Mountains. Staying in Jindabyne, we visited a trout hatchery, Charlotte's Pass and Thredbo. The hike up to Mount Kosciusko was especially enjoyed by all who made it to the top. On the day of the hike there was a very strong wind which made the ascent particularly difficult. However, once at the top the view was most rewarding and it was a great achievement especially, for the younger ones in the group.



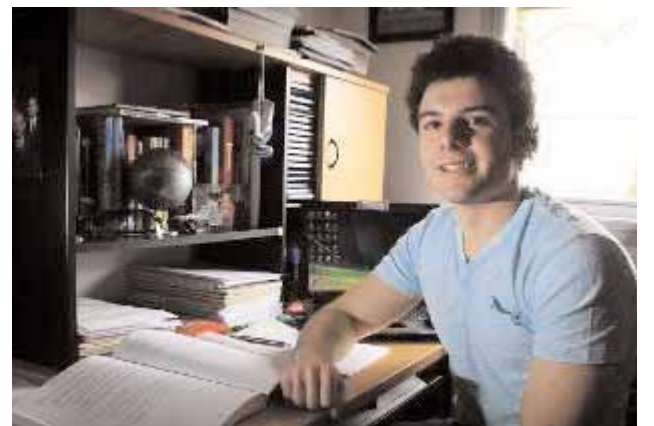
Nick - "Rama"
6th Bankstown Greek Scout Group

Pass the 90 mark and collect \$20,000

HUNDREDS of Year 12 students yet to sit the HSC have been offered lucrative university scholarships to stop a brain drain from Western Sydney.

The University of Western Sydney has notified almost 200 of the brightest students from schools in the city's west a \$20,000 grant is theirs if they score an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank of 90 or more.

"The scholarships are a way of giving the opportunity for higher education to more people,"



Scholarship ... HSC student Costa Cassimatis at home / Pic: Craig Greenhill Source: The Daily Telegraph

a spokesman said.

"Certainly one of the key points is to get more people from Greater Western Sydney into u-

niversity."

The University of New England also offers early entry to more than 1650 high school students on recommendations from their principals.

Students who complete a year of the Principals Recommendation program, which is not a scholarship, can then apply to the University of Sydney more easily. The most popular degrees chosen by students this year were primary school teaching, nursing, arts and psychology.

Moorebank High School captain Costa Cassimatis yesterday said he was excited to be offered a UWS scholarship.

The Chipping Norton local wants to study physiotherapy or occupational therapy.

Article from the Daily Telegraph

Alex Dimitriades Stars in "Summer Coda"

Greece's Alex Dimitriades stars in the new film "Summer Coda", which has really impressed the Australian press. The movie is filmed in Australia, primarily in the countryside. The film director is Richard Grey. The action of this new Australian drama centers around the return of Heidi played by Rachel Taylor, to Australia in search of family and friends. With only a violin and a little cash, she ends up catching the attention of a handsome farmer, i.e. Alex Dimitriades who takes her home to his orange grove. According to the Australian press, this movie will be Dimitriades' best movie since he last played a homosexual. He has played roles in numerous movies which were filmed in Greece such as "Wedding Party" and "The Kings of Mykonos".

The movie premiere was on October the 19th in Melbourne. "Summer Coda" is currently being played in special cinemas in Australia. Dimitriades noted that this movie actually forces us to choose our own adventure: "Personally, I don't really know where I'm going, but I'm sure looking forward to it," he says. It's not a bad attitude to have.