

Students listen with intensity to a presentation in the great Greek pastime of backgammon during an orientation session with Alexis Phylactopoulos, President of College Year in Athens (CYA).



## College Year in Athens (CYA) is a Life Transforming Experience

By Constantine S. Sirigos

“We place an emphasis on learning beyond the classroom... a hands-on learning experience in the rich environment of Greece. A significant portion of the semester involves field trips, which are designed not only to enhance the classroom material but also to give you a deeper understanding of Greece.”

That is the powerful promise and rich invitation College Year in Athens (CYA) presents on its website, which is reinforced by the words of its presi-

dent. “Some of them had never been on an airplane... They mature here in various ways, academically, emotionally and culturally.”

CYA is also important for deepening and strengthening U.S.-Greece relations, “because it creates a whole group of people who understand the Greek mentality and who rise into positions of importance... they convey that to Americans and they are more than additional ambassadors... they become spiritual friends of Greece and they carry within them the flame of philhellenism the rest of their lives,” said Phylactopoulos.

“We have about 200 alumni who are now pro-

they are coming for shorter periods of time. Phylactopoulos attributes that to students being more pressed for time to develop their careers through internships and other activities.

Notwithstanding that CYA fills up the students’ days and nights with learning and fun, they are exploring establishing internship programs, but as important as it is to help students’ employability, CYA already presents volunteering opportunities that are socially and spiritually enriching, for example, at refugee centers and environmental organizations and at museums and archaeological digs.

Phylactopoulos’ pride in CYA transcends his own contributions and those of his colleagues. His mother, “Ismene Phylactopoulou, had come to Greece in 1922 as a refugee from Smyrna. After graduating from Wellesley College she recognized the tremendous historical and cultural importance of Greece to liberal arts students and set about creating a serious academic program in Athens for college-age North Americans. She was the Director of CYA for nearly two decades and received the Doctorate of Humane Letters from DePauw University in recognition of her achievements in study abroad,” according to CYA’s website.



Alexis Phylactopoulos is the President of College Year in Athens (CYA).

dent, Alexis Phylactopoulos, and confirmed by its 10,000 alumni.

“It is not a program, it is a school, he told The National Herald, adding “CYA has completed 55 years in operation and it’s been an uphill journey both in terms of effort and success.”

CYA’s success is not only rooted in academic excellence. “Because they live with us in apartments the school provides, and learn in our own facilities and have their meals with us in our dining room, they feel like they belong to a family, and this spirit continues after they leave,” and during visits many years later.

CYA brings more than 300 university students to Athens each year to study Ancient Greek Civilization and the East Mediterranean Area in Fall and Spring Semesters, and it also offers summer courses over two consecutive 4-week sessions.

Programs and classes are in English at its own facilities in Athens next to the breathtaking Kallimarmaro Stadium and the National Gardens in the heart of the city.

The endeavor began in 1962 at a time when Greece, even 17 years after its conclusion, had not fully recovered from WWII.

“Americans were just discovering Greece again through people like Jackie Onassis and films like *Never on a Sunday* and George Seferis winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, and people wanted to find way to educate young people in Greek culture and civilization,” Phylactopoulos said.

It was also the middle of the Cold War which was a struggle for civilization, and Greece shone like a beacon as the birthplace of freedom and democracy.

For many students it was a life-changing experi-

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fessors in American and Canadian universities and they now send us their students. You can imagine the soft power influence that Greece exercises through a program like this,” he said.

CYA is also beneficial for students of Greek descent and the community as a whole. “When they come we help them discover their roots here and deepen their ties, and they in turn help our other students discover parts of Greece they would never have known because they invite them to their own horio – village, and homes.”

With the Greek-American intermarriage rate approaching 90% the days of hearing Greek at home and visiting Greece almost every year are passing. For most participants, CYA is their first and strongest experience of Greece. Phylactopoulos said “It is a unique way to get that first experience with Greece, or to start learning or to improve their language skills.”

Children with only one Greek parent tell him they are “so happy to be here. One said ‘it helps me discover a part of me that I know is there but I couldn’t get to.’”

The School is self-sustaining, through the fundraising efforts of the Board of Trustees and the fees it charges, which are much less than those for courses in the U.S., and there is some financial aid for students.

“Our 26 Trustees are very generous and we have very good governance... they take their role very seriously and also contribute generously from time to time,” he said. There are also appeals through the alumni newsletter – and anyone can make donations through the website, [cyathens.org](http://cyathens.org).

The commitment to excellence is unchanged, but the needs of the students have evolved so that

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