

FIFTEEN STUDENTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN EXPANDED THEIR KNOWLEDGE BY OFFERING VOLUNTEER WORK

Volunteer work in Chalkidiki by American students

“I am living a unique experience. What I am going to keep from my trip to Greece, is that wherever you travel in the world there will always be people with whom you can get close and become friends, independently of language and culture. In Greece I was treated with love and kindness. It’s difficult being away from home for a long time but it gets easier when you meet friends.”

By **Nicolette Bouka**

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Photo : Alex. Avramides : **The group of American students who came to Greece to offer volunteer work. These are :Staci Theresa Aubry, Michelle Marie Baumgart, John Edward Brady, Valerie Joy Godosian, Bei Yun He, Dalia Fadia Mammo, Estefania Rodriguez Tapias, David Isaac Rosenwein, Diana Elena Ruzs, Romeissa Selmane, Kasey Jiangting Wang, Yiqing Xu, Jessica Rose Lapworth, Emily Yunfang Wang, and Mehan Caitlin Gutting.**

John Brady, a fourth year student of Political Sciences and English Literature at the University of Michigan , is talking to “M” about feelings and experiences he had, and he will treasure as a precious gift upon leaving Greece. Along with 13 more students from several departments at the University of Michigan, and the two professors leading the trip, he came to our country, participating in the Global Intercultural Experience for Undergraduates, (GIEU) program. The program is offered by the University of Michigan for 12 years now, and its purpose is to foster intercultural exchange, expand students’ knowledge of issues outside the US, understand international problems, and acquaint them with health , educational, as well as political and cultural systems other than those of the US.

“Moreover, I find out that wherever you go problems are not so different. The problems that Greece is currently facing are not so different from those of USA. When you see them from close, you understand.” The students’ trip started on 23rd June, with Athens as the first destination, where they had the opportunity to visit the Academy of Athens, the University of Athens, and spend one day with Greek students from the University of Athens.

Their next destination was Ormylia, Chalkidiki, where they stayed for ten days, and volunteered in the center of social assistance, research, and medical screening and early detection “Panagia Philanthropini” of the Ormylia Foundation.

There, the students had the opportunity to assist with breast and cervical cancer screening and early detection, reinforcing the ability of research in the relative center, and facilitating its communication with international institutions, through blogging, social networking, and pamphlets. Afterwards, the American students spent a few days in Thessaloniki, visiting the “Papageorgiou” hospital and the University of Thessaloniki, and participated in programs of

cancer prevention and early detection. Their final destination will be Mytilini, and they will be leaving from Greece on 22nd July. In regard to their experience as a whole, students said that they would like to come to Greece again, and that they would encourage other students at the University of Michigan to participate in the program.

The program

‘Tremendous energy in a period of uncertainty.’ This phrase is included in an assessment of Greece by Christopher Friese, an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan, School of Nursing. His first contact with Ormylia Foundation was in 2005, in the framework of an organized mission to countries with an underdeveloped health system, like, Syria, Turkey and Egypt. This was the first contact, which was followed by a second mission to Kenya and Tanzania in 2008 and led to a long term friendship.

‘Our University is a state University, and funds have been significantly reduced. However, we are determined to reinforce collaborations with partners like the Ormylia Foundation. The University provided resources, so that students could travel to Greece, (the students paid only for their ticket), as we believe we have much to offer and much to learn at the same time. We feel very lucky to have started this collaboration, and we hope it will continue growing,’ Mr Friese stated in ‘M’.

The objective of the Global Intercultural Experience for Undergraduates program is to enhance students’ ability of acting as global citizens and take better advantage of their knowledge in contributing to the solutions of several issues of a country like Greece. The GIEU program in Greece includes visits to certain foundations and institutions, lectures and conferences with academics and health professionals, as well as contact with everyday people, in order to better conceptualize the issues that the country is facing.

Maria Katapodi, an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan, School of Nursing explains, that the GIEU program is competitive, as faculty from several departments at the University are submitting numerous project proposals. For the particular trip to Greece, there were 90 student applications, but the trip could only accommodate 14 students.

Photo : The young American students met adolescents victims of human trafficking entertained in Ormylia Foundation. The students socialized and played sports with them, with the goal of earning their trust.

Assistance to abused adolescents

The volunteer work of American students in the center ‘Panagia Philanthropini’, in Ormylia

Within the new effort of the center of ‘Panagia Philanthropini’ to provide free of charge medical checkups to abused orphans and children victims of trafficking, the American students had the opportunity to meet those adolescents, listen to their personal stories, and play with them. ‘I was impressed by the clinic in Ormylia, as people here have done a lot for their community. I won’t forget either, how resilient were the children who came for checkup, despite the difficulties they have faced so far,’ student John Brady says.

David Rosenwein, third year student in Political Sciences has a similar opinion and he explains in "M", "it's remarkable how fearless these children are despite what they have been through so far. Namely, upon meeting them for the first time you won't realize what they have gone through, what they have seen, the parents they have lost. What I am going to remember from my trip to Greece are the similarities as well as the differences in the health and education systems in Greece, compared to the ones in the US. Also the chance that was given to us, to assist people who work in Ormylia, in achieving their goals."

The third year French Literature student, Dalia Mammo, is sharing her own experience. As she described in "M", she met children who did not speak English or Greek but only French and Arabic. Studying French Literature, she had the opportunity to be in good terms and chat with them, asking about their feelings, and translating to medical professionals what these adolescents were sharing with her. "It's amazing how strong and resistant they are. I could have never imagined what these children have gone through, in order to come here. I would like to become a medical doctor in the future, go and work in other countries, see how different things are there and be able to help", Dalia says.

Yiqing (Shirley) Xu, also seems enthusiastic, a fourth year Chemical Engineering student. "What I am going to keep, is how similar people are everywhere. We may come from different countries, have different values, culture and languages, but we basically like the same things, and we have been able to find common things between us. If you want to be in good terms by finding common points you can make this happen, especially among young people", Yiqing stated in "M".

A Greek American student, Alexander Christakis joined the group of students, currently in his first year of medical studies at the University of Massachusetts. They met in Ormylia for the first time, where Alexander came, knowing much about the monastery from his father who is Greek and a medical doctor. "It's a long time I had wished to come. I love the mission of the Ormylia center, that consists of helping people that nobody else approaches, as they belong to socially weak groups", Alexander states in "M". At the same time he seems enthusiastic upon talking about the chance he had had to talk with abused children and victims of trafficking, from 13-20 years old. "I got their history file, and I heard shocking and sad stories from them. I spoke with a child from Afghanistan, and I realized how important helping is. They can gradually trust you, and they talk to you. They open up and talk about their problems", Alexander says, by adding that "what mostly impressed me, is that those children feel they can hope for a better future. When I asked them "what would you want to be when you grow up", most of them replied, "I want to be a medical doctor or a mechanical engineer, I want to have friends in the future", "I'll definitely come here again".

1. **"Problems like those Greece is currently facing are not so different than those of the US. It's difficult to believe it until you see it with your own eyes", John Brady says.**
2. **"What I am going to keep from my trip in Greece, are the similarities, as well as the differences in the health and education system of Greece, compared to the ones in the USA", student David Rosenwein stated.**

3. "I had never thought of what kind of problems these children may have gone through, in order to come to the center of "Panagia Philanthropini" in Ormylia. It was really amazing how resilient and strong they are ", student Dalia Mammo states in "M".
4. "We may come from different countries of the world, have different values, language and culture, but we basically like the same things and we managed to find commonalities among us", Yiqing (Shirley) Xu refers.
5. "It's long time I had wanted to come. I love the mission of the Ormylia center , that consists from assisting people that no one else is approaching as they belong to socially vulnerable groups", Alexander Christakis is stating in "M".
6. "We are determined to help grow such collaborations , like with the Ormylia Foundation, Christopher Friese, an Assistant Professor, at the University of Michigan School of Nursing states in "M".
7. "There were more than 90 applications of students willing to volunteer for the GIEU program in Greece, but only 15 among them were selected", Maria Katapodi, an Assistant Professor, at the University of Michigan School of Nursing declares in "M".

The Ormylia Foundation

The center of "Panagia Philanthropini" of Ormylia is the philanthropic foundation of the holy community of Annunciation of Virgin Maria, of Ormyia.

According to the manager of the center, Kiriakos Antoniou, the modern monastery was founded by a contemporary elder, Archbishop Aimilianos of Holy Mount, whose vision had been the creation of a medical center near the monastery, that "would be the hand of philanthropy" of the monastery toward ordinary people.

In 1991 it started providing free of charge breast and cervical cancer screening and early detection for women in Central Macedonia, belonging to socially vulnerable groups. Ever since there have been over 150,000 free checkups for cancer to over 25,000 women of the area.

At the same time the Ormylia Foundation began collaborating with high rank centers of the EU and USA, among which is the Medical Center for Cancer of Karolinska Institute (Sweden), the Center for Cancer Control in Leuven , Belgium, and the American Center of Radiology. Throughout this it came out, that collaboration with young people, upcoming medical doctors and researchers, would be very useful, being able to bridge present and future.

"Since 1991, there has been a consistent flow of students of Medicine and Nursing coming in the summer in order to join the foundation and work in various sectors, by mainly helping as secretaries, software development, and issuance of guides and booklets on topics of public health for people here. They come in close touch with examined people, by getting their medical history , We thus have a new generation of scientists, friends and assistants, not only from Ormylia Foundation, but from whole Greece", Mr Antoniou explains in "M".

At the same time, he points out, that since 2001, there have been more than 150 students who came here, by adding that this year there has been a new effort in collaboration with the foundation "Arsis", in regard to free medical screening, for children who belong to weak groups, socially and financially, victims of abuse, abandoned, and trafficking. There have been round 15 children checked up, while those needing further assistance will be taken to the pediatric clinic of Hippocrates hospital in Thessaloniki.

"Since 2001, there has been a constant flow of students of Medicine and Nursing, who come in the summer and join the foundation, in various sectors, by mainly helping as secretaries, software development, and booklets as well as guides issued on topics of public health for people", the manager of center of Panagia Philanthropini" of Ormila Mr Kiriakos Antoniou, explained in "M".

Translation by: Katerina Katapodi