



GREEK **businessfile**

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2020 | No 128 | € 5.00

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CYA: Creating spiritual friends of Greece

College Year in Athens was started in order to enable students to immerse themselves into another culture, open a window, so to speak, to a world outside America, learn about Greece and its society by spending a year studying in Athens explains Alexis Phylactopoulos, President of CYA since 1986

by George Vailakis

What was the initial idea behind the College Year in Athens?

College Year in Athens was born at a time when Greece was being rediscovered in the 1960s. It was a time when Greece, having come out of the WWII on the side of the Allies, having finished with the Civil War and the decade of reconstruction, was experiencing a sort of political and cultural springtime. We had Seferis's Nobel Prize, George Papandreou's Center Government, the various films that portrayed Greece as a marvelous destination, Jackie Kennedy visiting in the summer, Churchill hosted by Onassis on his boat, Maria Callas performing in Epidaurus. This was the setup, and Americans started looking for a school to send their col-

lege-age children or grandchildren to study Classical Greece.

This was the background and the founder of CYA Ismene Phylactopoulou seized the opportunity and launched an educational startup, if you like, to fulfill this need, this demand. The idea was to create a program of studies for US college juniors, since by that time, the trend of a year abroad was becoming an important part of the American university ethos.

CYA aimed to enable students to immerse themselves into another culture, open a window, so to speak, to a world outside America, learn about Greece and its society by spending a year studying in Athens. Undoubtedly, what was in the founder's mind was to

spread Hellenic studies and create spiritual friends of Greece.

CYA was established in 1962. It seems it was one of the first study abroad programs in Greece. Could you share with us some highlights from this long journey?

CYA was the first Study Abroad program in Greece and one of the first ones in Europe. Its beginning in the first decades was very humble; a rented space at Dexameni in Kolonaki and rented classrooms at the Hellenic American Union.

The first highlight was its expansion from a small program of classical studies to a larger program encompassing social sciences courses and broaden-

ing the curriculum base. This appealed to a larger audience of students who visited Greece not only to understand its culture but also the social, political, and economic dynamics of the eastern Mediterranean. Then came the move from Kolonaki to the more real neighborhood of Pangrati in the 1990s and the acquisition of self-owned premises next to Kallimarmaro in 2004, which gave the school a permanent home in a very privileged location.

With a view of the Parthenon and the Acropolis, the National Garden, the Kallimarmaro Stadium, the Philopappos hill, and Lycabettus from our balconies, our students "...keep (their) thoughts raised high...", as Cavafy says.

Another highlight was the adoption of the new trend for short-term studies. First, College Year stopped being a year anymore but mostly a college semester, as the pace of life became quicker, due to the jet age and the arrival of the internet. Students seemed to have less time available to discover the world and themselves by spending a whole year abroad. Nowadays, CYA is also successfully serving the educational needs of small university groups that come with their professors for a short-term educational experience.

Now, over 50 years later, CYA can be claimed to be a "success story". What is the secret of this success?

The secret of its success was first of all the fact that it was founded correctly for an educational institution, as a non-profit entity in the United States. This gave it credibility in its formative years. The hiring of top academics from very early on, like H.D.F. Kitto, A.R. Burn, Raphael Demos, Nicholas Yialouris, Dimitris Nianias, Constantine Politis, Philip Sherrard, George Savvides, Alexis Dimaras, and Michael Herzfeld, to name a few, added academic credibility.

Its system of governance is one that CYA is proud of and very much unlike what we know in Greece. A group of eminent persons from the US and Greece act as Trustees; they control, guide and support the institution. They

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CYA STUDY ABROAD IN GREECE



help design the big picture, the strategy, and the road forward, but they keep out of everyday business.

CYA's adaptability to changing social and political circumstances and its resilience have allowed it to weather any crisis that came its way; the military junta, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, the Gulf wars, the Kosovo war, the Greek economic crisis – all were faced and turned into educational opportunities.

I should also mention the high level of pastoral care for our students, whose needs are taken care of by a dedicated and resourceful staff. Our students are not only housed and fed at the school but are also given support in all physical and mental health needs by staff available 24/7.

Keeping in touch with our 10,000 or more alumni is a source of inspiration and financial support. These are people who regard their time at CYA as a transformational experience of great importance in their lives.

Last but not least, the secret weapons of CYA's success are the skill and dedication of its staff and the high quality of its instructors. A true spirit of teamwork that allows seamless collaboration among those responsible for the organization, the genuine care for the students, and the sound academic instruction have given CYA its reputation it enjoys in American academia. We are now in a position to host the students of our alumni who have become professors of Greek subjects in American universities.



Alexis Phylactopoulos and Vassilis Sgoutas, UIA Past President

What is the current situation of CYA?

Currently we are in a difficult position, but we have faith that we will overcome what the pandemic brought to us. We normally have about 1,000 students a year who either come to us as independent semester students, attending our four-course academic program, with an educational field study in Crete, the Peloponnese, Delphi, and northern Greece, or who come to us in faculty-led short-duration programs that we design to fit the particular needs of each group. Well, last spring we had just started synchronous online instruction, because all schools in Greece had been ordered closed, when

we had to suddenly send all our students back home overnight since their universities recalled them when the US government raised the alert level for Covid-19 in Europe and in Greece.

Of course, instruction continued in asynchronous online fashion as soon as our students returned to their homes. This was a great feat accomplished by our professors, who managed to switch from in-person teaching to online almost immediately.

After that, all enrollments dried up. There were no students last summer and all the faculty-led programs planned for last spring and summer were cancelled. This Fall semester, we

have a very small group of highly motivated students who decided that they will not miss their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study in Greece. They are very happy and have been enjoying their experience in spite of all the pandemic-related restrictions.

What are the benefits of CYA action?

The benefits are huge for the students who participate in the program. It helps them achieve intercultural competence, familiarity with the Greek language, but most importantly it helps them emotionally and allows them to achieve a sense of independence and self-reliance. It is a truly significant transformational experience.

For Greece, the result of CYA action is that our alumni become ambassadors of Greece for the rest of their lives. We all know how studying in another country turns one into a spiritual friend of this country. The benefit for Greece in terms of soft power is enormous. Hopefully one day the Greek state will recognize the huge importance of this operation.

What are your future plans?

Our plans are to hang on and survive this difficult period. Before the pandemic, CYA was on a take-off mode; we needed more courses and more academic and residential spaces to take care of the increasing numbers of students. For the present, CYA is making use of the opportunities offered by digital technology and is introducing online courses, virtual internships, and a virtual lecture series that is becoming very popular among our alumni and friends.

In addition, recognizing that many foreign students may be disinclined to start university studies right now, we are launching a gap program for pre-college-age students. When Covid-19 becomes a memory, we hope to return to our previous position and continue our mission of educating foreign university students, making them study and love Greece, its culture, its ancient legacy, its language, and its people.



Alexis Phylactopoulos is President of College Year in Athens since 1986 and of DIKEMES, an educational associate of CYA. His first degree is from the University of Athens and his post-graduate degrees from Princeton University and the University of Cambridge. His specialization is the Law of the Sea. He has served as Director of Press and Information of the Greek Embassies in Washington D.C. and Mexico City. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Athens College, the Greek Archaeological Society, and EUASA (the European Association of Study Abroad). He is also President of the Princeton Club of Greece, and has served as Board member of companies and educational institutions.

