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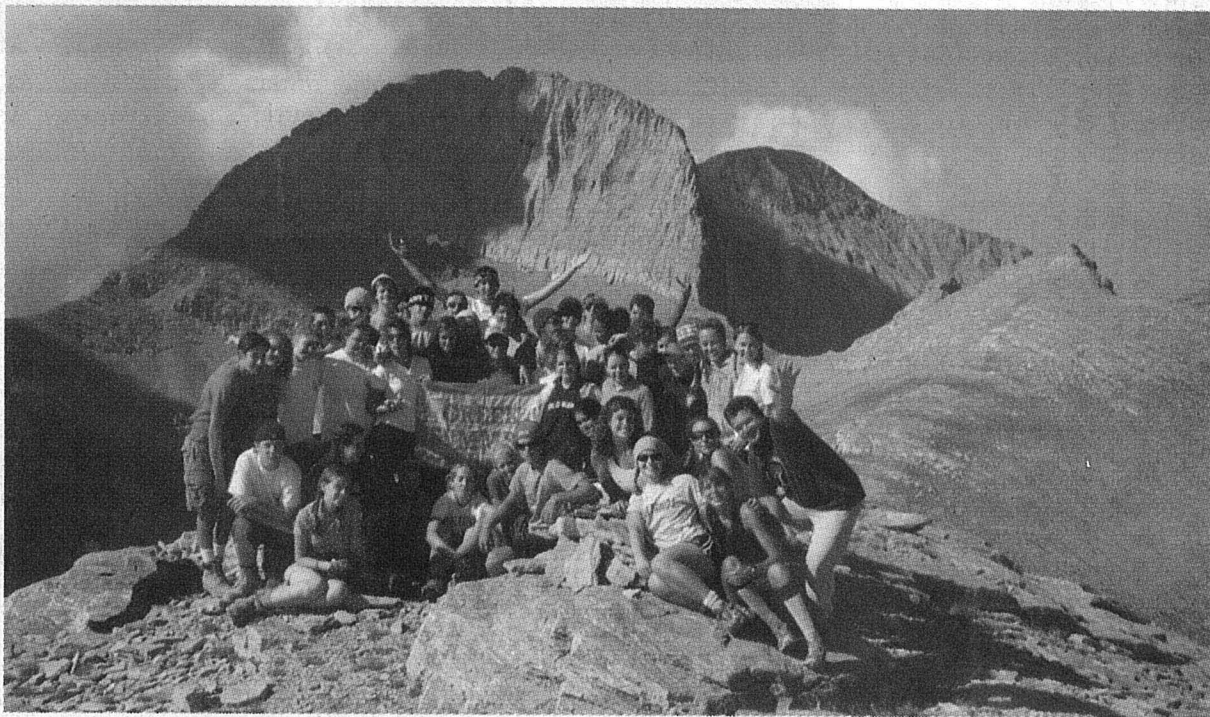
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Former participant returns as coordinator for Greek Summer

By MARIA A. KARAMITSOS

CHICAGO—Greek Summer, an intercultural exchange program, changes lives. Matina Marks attended the program back in 1993, and it changed her forever. The experience made such an impression to her, that she returned as a counselor for several years before taking on the position of coordinator in 2007.

The daughter of George and Roula Karcazes, Matina grew up in Wilmette, IL. Along with her parents and brother Dimitri, she attended Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Glenview. The family attended church every Sunday, and the parents instilled in the children a sense of pride in their ethnicity, their culture and community. From a young age, Matina attended youth groups, participated in Junior Olympics and played basketball. She attended Fanari Camp for several years. Ironically, it was at Fanari that she was introduced to another Chicago Greek, who years later would become her husband.



Greek Summer 2007 at the top of Mount Olympus.

tuition is \$5,500, however, it is an extensive program, and students are never the same as when they arrived. All who have attended describe it as "life altering."

Kids come from all over the United States, and are of all different ethnic backgrounds. Some have hailed from Costa Rica, Switzerland and other countries, though they are American students at international schools.

"Many of the kids have never left their hometowns, let alone the country," Matina added. The maximum number of participants is 35, which is a manageable number for transportation and team building, as well as all the activities in the program.

"It's geared to kids who want to do a Peace Corp-type project, but it's short term, and it's for high school-aged kids," explained Matina.

The students arrive, and they spend several days getting to know each other, including three days camping on the beach. They go to the Farm School, which is their home base, and learn about the school, bail hay, see the dairy, and more. For many city kids, it's a whole new world. They attend orientation at a seaside camp, and visit the home of former director Bruce Lansdale, who ran the American Farm School program for 40 years. He founded Greek Summer in 1970. Since Mr. Lansdale is now up in years, his wife Elizabeth (Tad) speaks to the kids, discussing the idea of metamorphosis. She speaks to them about how they see themselves now, as well as in the future. Among her words of wisdom, she advises the participants to slow down and reflect, to realize that they will never stop learning, and that it's never too late to change. This event has been very inspiring to the kids. The program has meant so much to the Lansdales, that Mrs. Lansdale wrote a book about her experiences, called "My Metamorphosis: Why Do I Love Greece," (Enaretos Press).

From there, they go to a Greek village, where they live with a host family and work on a community service project. This is the heart of the program. "This is the part of

the summer that they'll remember the most," she continued. "At times it can be challenging, and they push themselves. They grow, they change, often in ways that hadn't imagined." These projects have included paving a road from the center of a small town to the church and more. Last year, they created a cultural center for a small mountain town. There wasn't a town square or other gathering place. There was an overgrown yard, where the walls were painted with graffiti. The group cleaned it up, poured concrete and covered it with tiles to create a place where the local dance group could perform. They painted, built several park benches, refurbished playground equipment and gave the area of much-needed facelift.

Since most of the attendees are not Greek and do not speak Greek, one of the most difficult parts of staying with a host family is communication. The challenges are not simple cultural, but social and physical as well. Kids and families have developed unique ways to communicate and bridge the language gap. Some have played their own version of "Pictionary," to determine what to eat. Pictures or drawings of items have been most helpful. Somehow they find a way to communicate and connect

The next phase of the program is a 10-day cultural tour, where they pile on a bus and visit some of the most historic sites in Greece. Some of the kids have studied art, and so they really get into the tour and seeing the ruins and other works of art. At the end of the tour the group spends three to four days on a Greek island.

The final phase is a hike to the top of Mount Olympus. "You'd think that as many times as I have done the hike, it would be old hat to me," confided Matina. "However, each time brings a new set of challenges. Last year we got caught in a hailstorm. There was lightning too. At that point, we were 4-1/2 hours up and at that point, it was too late to turn around. We figured out a way to endure it, and we made it to the top."

At the end of the summer session, the kids regroup at the Lansdales' home for a final farewell. At this time, they also write a letter to themselves, which is mailed to them about six months after they have returned home. "It's a great way for them to check their progress. Did the change last? Did they revert to their 'old self?' It's a check on themselves to see where they are. It's very effective," Matina told *The Greek Star*.

Additionally, the program was designed to create ambassadors for the program at the American Farm School. The kids have such an incredible experience, that they go home and tell all their friends about it. It increases awareness of the school, which is crucial, as the school is dependent on donations. Attendees to the illustrious American Farm School are admitted via scholarship only, and therefore pay no tuition or fees. Over the years, the Greek American community has generously donated and supported the school's endeavors.

The American Farm School was established in 1904, as a private, non-profit institution designed to serve the rural population of Greece and the Balkans. The school's divisions include the Secondary School, the Dimitris Perrotis College of Agricultural Studies and the Department of Lifelong Learning.

To participate in the Greek Summer program, students may apply online at www.greeksummer.org. They will be required to write three short essays, provide a recommendation from their school and participate in an interview. Matina conducts the interviews, and noted how difficult the process can be.

"We see kids who are trying who apply simply because they want community service hours for their college applications. We seek kids that want to make a real commitment, that show a genuine interest in the process."

For more information on the American Farm School, visit www.afs.edu. For more information on Greek Summer and how to apply, visit www.greeksummer.org. It's an experience teens will not soon forget.

In 1993, she attended Greek Summer, a program under the auspices of the American Farm School in Thessaloniki, Greece.

"My brother went in 1991. My aunt was involved with the school and told us about the program," said Matina. "Dimitri said that the experience changed his world views, made him more independent. He loved it so much and wouldn't stop talking about it, so of course I had to go and check it out for myself."

She applied for the program, and attended, the summer prior to her senior year in high school. "The program made such an impact in my life, that I returned in 2001 to be a counselor. I went back in 2005 as head counselor. I took my husband with so he could share the experience. He'd heard me talk so much about it, he had to see for himself, so he took a sabbatical from work and we went for the summer," she added.

Between the time she attended as a participant and as a counselor, Matina attended Kenyon College, in Gambier, OH, near Columbus. There, she earned a bachelor of arts degree in political science.

She went on to receive a master of education from DePaul University in Chicago. She taught in the Chicago Public School system for several years. She spent six years at the Alexander von Humboldt School in the Humboldt Park neighborhood. Matina taught 6th grade (all subjects) for three years, and then 8th grade reading and language arts for the final three. During that time, she married Dean, son of John and Niki Marks.

"I got a little burnt out in the classroom, so I was looking for other opportunities, and this came up with Greek Summer. The fact that they allow me to work from Chicago is wonderful," said Matina.

Greek Summer has been a five-and-a-half-week intensive program, and starting in 2008, it will be lengthened to six weeks. Many have "sticker shock" when they hear the