

The American Hellenic Institute Foundation
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***5th Annual Conference on
"The Future of Hellenism in America"***

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Members of the Clergy

Distinguished Members of the Dais

Ladies & Gentlemen

It is an honor & privilege for me to be here this morning. It is a particular honor for me to share this time with you on the anniversary of OXI DAY, while we together explore the future of Hellenism in America.

Indeed, we all are all truly honored to be here this Saturday to examine the present state of Hellenism in American, while we play the role of a Cassandra and as we try to look at the future. But more than that, we are here to celebrate our Hellenic traditions that have proven their strength in time and to remember the pioneers that opened the door for the achievements of future generations. For our participation here is much like a homecoming --much like a return to Greece, or like the deep ache of **Odysseus for Ithaca**. Or In the words of T.S. Elliot,

**"to arrive where we started and to
know the place for the first time."**

My role this morning is to analyze the future of Greek American Organizations in the future. Specifically, I will be looking at the future of the Order of AHEPA as it approaches its 85th anniversary. What will be the role of such Greek American Organizations in the next generation of Hellenes? Greek Americans today are made up of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and even 4th generation. For sociologists tell us that for most immigrant groups in the United States, the American assimilation/acclturation process is nearly complete as an ethnic group reaches its 5th generation. Knowledge of the language, politics and culture of the homeland are nearly lost. Will this be the fate of our 5th generation? Will there be Greek Americans in that not-too distant future? What role will organizations have to change, adapt and prove worthy of the younger, better educated and more dynamic Greek American professional? Will our organizations continue to be relevant, productive and meaningful for the future of Hellenism to survive?

Today, more than ever, the Greek American community has become highly mobile and highly suburbanized. The old concept of the identifiable "neighborhood community" has been dissipated for all but a few East Coast ethnic enclaves. With the geographic dissipation of the community, it becomes even more important for Greek American organizations to adapt and to become relevant for the new Greek American professional to become a contributing member.

The U.S. Office of Education a number of years ago found that the Greek American community was becoming largely homogenized into the American mainstream. The conclusion was simply that the Greeks achieved a high level of educational and economic upward mobility that leads to assimilation and acculturation at a rapid pace. The popularly held view about the Greeks in America was:

"The rapid Americanization of the Greeks is a notable phenomenon. Interest in, and knowledge of, the language, culture and affairs of the homeland is declining rapidly among those born in the United States of Greek parentage.

Greek Americans have evidently stirred up little interest among scholars and researchers in the United States. Little

has been written about them, and next to nothing about Greek American Educational efforts.” (USOE, 1970)

Is this our future? Is this where Greek organization will be in the next generation? We hold the keys to these answers as we redefine the objectives of the organizations that help maintain our relevance to our heritage and our homeland. In today's world will the AHEPA and other organization continue to provide programs for renewed spirit and renewed membership? Will the AHEPA have the significance for the next generation?

For us is important to remember the ideals of AHEPA in order to find the road for Hellenism to flourish in America today, we must draw upon the very Beacon of light that has illuminated our way. We know our Hellenic history, but we are eternally grateful for it role and guidance.

For a moment, let us compare the world in 1922, when the AHEPA began with the world in 2006..

Our immigrant fathers and grandfathers put public service and American citizenship first in their minds, as America was their adopted home. My grandfather was one such immigrant. He and my father were the Beacons of Light that carried their Hellenic Heritage in their hearts and souls and sharing it with their children. My grandfather left the island of Marmara, seeking refuge from the Ottoman Empire; he arrived in Los Angeles over 100 years ago. In America, he opened the First Greek Coffee House, to cater to the new immigrant, help find jobs and homes for the young boys who were coming to Los Angeles.

In that age, new immigrants arrived to a strange, New World. Strange language, customs, work habits and attitudes were pervasive. The inhumanity of the industrial age called upon ever increasing waves of immigrants to be lost in heartless factories.

The new immigrant needed help in the alien sounding language and customs to become American Citizens. They also needed, however, the comfort of their compatriots and the aid of common spirit to build new homes, while preserving their golden heritage.

The immigrants continued their spirit and commitment. That spirit, was itself a Beacon of Light, traveling across oceans, was seen as the foundation where a diverse Heritage could be promoted for future generations of Americans.

The early American immigrant needed aid, comfort, direction and unity. They needed an organization to preserve, protect and perpetuate their cultural heritage in a brave new world. The AHEPA would be such an organization.

A future that would have the vision to see the end of the **Melting Pot** of the heartless, thoughtless industrial age that would eventually usher in a new, humanitarian and multicultural nation. But the industrial age and nation building were the pervasive goals of the times. Immigrants worked the factories, railroads, mines and mills to the beat of industry. A young nation was being created, crafted and carried across a continent. The Melting Pot would predominate and forge a new American. "**E pluribus Unum,**" out of many, one, was the call of nation building. But the new immigrant needed more. They needed aid, direction and most of all, a touch of their Hellenic Heritage. Each new wave of immigrants was treated more harshly. Those from Mediterranean cultures were not regarded as from the same "stock" as earlier immigrants. Immigrants were denied the inclusion into the "sidewalks of gold" that they came to capture. Guided only by their spirit, their personal fortress, the immigrant withstood the test of the forging nationalism. On railroad gangs, mining crews, factory assembly lines, the new immigrant voices were silent, but their vision and spirit remained, like the legendary "Greek Fire" of Byzantium, that would stay lit, even when underwater, reemerging at a time to ignite the flame once again.

The **AHEPA** represents the largest Hellenic American cultural organization in the world. The AHEPA provided the Beacon of Light to the hundreds of thousands of Greek Immigrants that arrived in America. The AHEPA was a means for preserve the Hellenic culture within the context of the American Dream.

For nearly 9 decades, AHEPA has fostered a proud history of programs that promote Hellenic Heritage, education, and charitable and humanitarian goals.

The legacy of AHEPA accomplishments is long. In the early years, the AHEPA offered the Greek immigrant aid, protection and comfort. The AHEPA fought discrimination on a broad scale. Early Greek immigrant businesses, Churches, homes needed an organization defend them in the Melting Pot of America. The AHEPA set off a noble goal of education to create new citizens, productive learners and members of their adopted country. The AHEPA saw the wisdom of promoting Hellenic Culture, but along with American citizenship.

As the immigrants matured, grew and prospered a new threat to Hellenic culture emerged. The loss of heritage among the young. The AHEPA transformed its early goal of making Americans out of Greeks, into preserving the Greek heritage for the children of the immigrants. Education remains the highest goal of AHEPA. Today, AHEPA continues to donate over \$500,000 annually to scholarships, grants, and programs in Modern Greek studies. Again, the emphasis is on preservation of culture today.

The AHEPA provided the immigrant Greek respect, accomplishment and fulfillment. Numerous programs were undertaken to promote the interests of the Greek American community. A leader in finding a cure for Thallasimia, in a national bone marrow registry program, programs to promote the study of Greek culture and language in schools. Further, as the AHEPA memberships ages, a new program building senior citizen housing programs in a number of major American cities. Providing the elderly with safe, comfortable housing on a broad scale.

Another Beacon of Light is in the area of charitable goals. The AHEPA continues to foster aid and donations for many worthwhile projects. Greek War Relief collected funds to aid Greece in the Second World War. A system of 12 clinics was built all over Greece. Later, Hospital's in Athens and Salonica, Earthquake, hurricane and disaster relief also color the AHEPA's rich contribution

In the attempt to preserve our religious faith within the diversity of America, the AHEPA provide yet another Beacon of Hope and Faith to the early church in America. From the beginning of AHEPA in Atlanta, Georgia, AHEPA has come to the aid of our Holy Orthodox Church. We must not forget that In the early days of immigration, the AHEPA was vigilant in protecting our immigrants and our churches from the Ku Klux Klan, No Nothing Parties and other agents of doom. Eventually, the AHEPA served the new immigrant well, kept the spirit alive to help organize communities and build churches and chapters throughout the United States and Canada.

AHEPA's record is a recognized one raising a million of dollars on behalf of St. Basil's Academy and Hellenic College. Further, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island National Museum received sizable AHEPA donations and support. In the service of their adopted nation, the AHEPA would go on record in contributing to the very fabric of the American nation.

Yet, the Brightest Beacon of all is in the support of our youth and the future of Hellenism in America. Here, the AHEPA continues to foster a proud history and support in programs, education and community support.

The AHEPA serves as an instrument of Hellenic Culture in America. The Torch has been carried through three and forth generation Hellenes. As my grandfather carried the Torch to America in the beginning of the last century, it is my children that will carry it proudly into the 21st Century. Its role as a Beacon of Light has served to maintain our culture and traditions in what would have been an alien environment.

The strength of the Torch is evident in the address of Professor Kimon Doukas, Past Supreme President of the AHEPA given to the 44th Supreme Convention in:

Our Hellenic background, steeped in the Christian teachings of our Holy and Venerable Church of Orthodoxy, has given us the courage and strength to understand and to absorb our American environment in a perfect union, which:

**Promotes loyalty to the USA
Revives the Glory of eternal Hellas
Respects inalienable rights of mankind
Strives for the betterment of Society
Abhors political corruption
Defends and protects oppressed people
Labors for the perfection of Morality
Champions the cause of Education
Loves God and Man and
Hopes for a measure of Happiness.**

Today, AHEPA continues to promote our Hellenic heritage into the 21st Century.

The Torch is being passed to a new generation of Hellene. A generation that is to keep the spirit alive, the flame burning and the strength of will to carry the Torch. No longer do we have the heartless factories and mines, but today we have the growing commercialism, mass communications and all pervasive pop culture to help stray our youth from continuing their mission.

What will the AHEPA of the 21st Century look like? What will the future of the next generation of Hellenism look like? For the AHEPA and for Hellenic organizations generally, a vast transformation is necessary for not only their survival, but the survival of Hellenism!

The Transformation of Ahepa into a 10 point Strategic Plan that includes:

1. Ending the political intrigues and alliances of the past.
2. Unify the AHEPA into ONE AHEPA Family.
3. Unify the Sons of Pericles and Maids of Athens into ONE Hellenic Youth Forum with collegiate chapters.
4. Institute a "National Unity Forum" on Hellenism.
 - a. Sponsor a National Unity Annual Forum.
 - b. Coordinate Congressional action.

- c. Support grants writing and programs.
- 5. Expand the “E” in AHEPA into new programs:
 - a. \$10,000 scholarships
 - b. New university grants on Hellenic studies.
 - c. Chairs in Hellenic Studies
 - d. Professorship in Hellenic studies
 - e. Expand the Journey to Greece and Student Exchange opportunities.
 - f. Promote Western Civilization in our schools.
 - g. Teach Hellenic Traditions in America to our youth.
 - h. Sponsor a National Week of Greek Letters.
 - i. Promote and fund new National Youth Programs.
- 6. From Ritual to Virtual Meetings and On-Line Membership.
- 7. AHEPA HQ to become: the “George Leber Center for American Hellenism”
 - a. Expand historical archives.
 - b. Expand the internship program.
- 8. Sponsor an “Hellenic Heritage Week” for all schools.
- 9. Rename the “Supreme” Lodge and District Lodge.
- 10. Sponsor a Mentor Program for the youth.

The guiding lamp of the Beacon of civilization can once again serve as the Beacon for the 21st Century. For our future generations to have that wonderful “**spirit**” that transcends time and oceans let us remember the importance of the Journey itself. Like Odysseus, let us commit our spirit, our love and our determination to carry the Journey on through future generations. In our hearts, let us remember the importance of Oxi Day and our Greek Heritage.

In conclusions, Let us take special note of the eternal words of C.P. **Cavafy** when writing his memorable “**Poseidonians:**” as he told the fate of the Greeks living in Magna Graecia, so long separated from Hellas and their lament for their distant heritage. For they were a people slowly witnessing the loss of their light and spirit!

"The Poseidonians forgot the Greek language

after so many centuries of mingling
with Tyrrhenians, Latins, and other foreigners.
The only thing surviving from their ancestors
was a Greek festival, with beautiful rites,
with lyres and flutes, contests and wreaths.
And it was their habit toward the festival's end
to tell each other about their ancient customs
and once again to speak Greek names
that only few of them still recognized.
And so their festival always had a melancholy ending
because they remembered that they too were Greeks,
they too once upon a time were citizens of Magna
Graecia; and how low they'd fallen now, what they'd
become,
living and speaking like barbarians,
cut off so disastrously from the Greek way of life.

" C. Cavafy translated by E. Keeley and P. Sherrard