



## Cultivating Hellenism in Greek American Youth

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As a second generation Greek-American, my personal experiences of the past decade have given me a unique perspective on cultivating Hellenism in Greek-American youth. I have four recommendations: 1) Engage youth from an early age in fun Hellenic-based activities through the Church or Greek social clubs that will allow them to meet and become friends with other Greek youth and their families; 2) Provide opportunities for Greek youth to participate in summer camps either in the United States or in Greece that will give them the “Greek experience;” 3) Initiate a dialogue for Church leaders and Greek social clubs to offer more Greek language classes for kids of all ages and levels; and 4) Encourage youth to join Hellenic societies at their universities and actively promote participation in initiatives such as Next Generation Initiative, which provides opportunities for Greek youth to network with others and to mentor with successful Greek-American entrepreneurs and leaders in their fields.

The cultivation of Hellenism is an ongoing process, made possible by the efforts of previous generations. It requires a passion and appreciation of our heritage and being proud of our accomplishments. We are the stewards of Hellenism, embodying its ideals of education, culture, and challenge. It is up to us to persevere and pass on these high standards to the next generation.

From a young age, like many others with my background, I quickly became involved in the Church community. My growth beyond this stage was due to that community environment and how it opened the door for many of my Greek-American friendships. The Greek Orthodox Church provides a strong family base that creates a foundation to meet and connect with others of similar backgrounds. Simultaneously, the Church-sponsored Greek Orthodox Youth of America (GOYA) provides a vibrant atmosphere to expand one’s network as a Greek youth and opens one’s eyes to the sheer size of the neighboring Greek community.

Towards the end of high school, the time approaches where an individual generally starts developing a sense of urgency about the “next step.” In most cases, parents or guardians offer suggestions of beneficial experiences to undergo for the immediate future. Two highly regarded Greek programs that I particularly find beneficial for the future of Hellenism are the American Farm School: Greek Summer and the Ionian Village project. Although I have firsthand experience with the former, I include the latter due to the positive experiences of many friends, colleagues, and family members. Both programs aim to promote the Greek cultural experience, educate, and cultivate Hellenism within youth participants. This is especially rich for those who have never traveled to Greece separately from their family.

At the American Farm School, I was involved in a variety of activities. These included community service (over 80 hours) in the village of Nea Gonia, where we constructed a walkway from an ancient well to a local rest area and benches at the site. We planted trees to frame, unify, prevent erosion, and ultimately provide shade for visitors. This was in addition to participating in organic farming activities, learning about the production of cheese and learning how to cultivate honey, olives, and grapes. From those activities and my interactions with the local communities, I took away much more than I gave. It opened my eyes to Greece’s struggling economy, but also the resilience of the Greek locals. I saw the level of attentiveness and passion the Greeks embody in their work in the wake of the economic crisis. For a multitude of reasons, including bureaucratic ineffectiveness, the world has negatively viewed the Greek work ethic. Participation in programs such as these, promoted by the Greek Government and local Greek communities help instill Hellenism within our youth.

It is vital from a young age that kids become aware of the importance of language to understanding their heritage. Growing up, it became apparent that a common denominator existed that separated the Greek-Americans: the ability to speak Greek. I cannot begin to thank my parents enough for valuing the importance of the Greek language and the subsequent opportunities it could/would create for me. Concurrently, the ability to speak your ancestral homeland’s native language encourages you to meet and interact with locals. Though knowing your ethnic language doesn’t guarantee you will be inspired to expand your cultural horizons, it does set a groundwork that enables you to make a choice. I lament the slow loss of our language in the Greek American Community. I believe this is a result of lack of educational opportunities which is something the Greek community is very capable of developing.

Entering college, like many others, I was overwhelmed with the myriad of opportunities available and how to most actively engage myself. Luckily, in my first few weeks I met Konstantine Ouranitsas, a fellow student who was serving as the President of Drexel’s Hellenic Student Association. During our first discussion, he

encouraged me to come to the group meeting and get involved, and I quickly became impressed and motivated by his passion. I yearned to get involved and I swiftly took on senior roles, including Vice President, then President. Club involvement in such groups as the Hellenic student associations is incredibly helpful when extending a Greek social network. In addition to this, there are other options available. The Next Generation Initiative led by Leon Stavrou is one of the strongest resource hubs for aspiring Greek Americans. The initiative involves connecting students and young professionals with mentors and established leaders in all fields. Taking advantage of this and promoting the opportunities provided by initiatives such as this is an important step in the process of cultivating Hellenism and encouraging relationship building.

As I repeatedly have said, an individual is a product of environment and there are ways of shaping experience within that environment to best accommodate growth. I advise my fellow Greek Americans to do whatever you can to connect with your roots, and if you can, make an effort to increase your language ability. You should also seek opportunities and activities around you to connect with others similar to you; people who have common goals and aspirations, such as members of your local Greek Orthodox Church/GOYA. Participate in summer programs, associations, and other clubs, if available. Finally, identify local groups, initiatives, and mentors to further expand your network. As far as mentors, choose someone who you see as embodying the kind of person you want to be. I hope this essay can help build awareness and motivate others to take similar steps so we can continue to cultivate Hellenism in the United States.

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