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Stavros Niarchos Language Grant Report

In the summer of 2008 I was enabled to participate in the Hellenic Culture Center's Greek Language and Culture Program in Skala, Loutron, Lesvos, Greece (AEOLIS) with funds received from the Stavros Niarchos Language Study Fellowship. This six-week intensive language studies program, from June 30th to August 8th, contained 180 hours of language classes at the Intermediate I, II and III levels. I also had the opportunity to attend classes on traditional Greek dancing, cooking, and singing as well as go on expeditions of cultural interest. My language ability, most especially in speaking and comprehension, but also in the acquisition of vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, grammar and syntax, has improved immeasurably as a result of this experience.

The formal class experience at the program in Lesvos contributed most to improvements in my grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, and gave me a greater awareness of how the language functions as a whole. The method of teaching used by AEOLIS is effective, and consistently maintained across all the staff, although the level of difficulty and the focus for each class was often different from session to session (a session lasted two weeks). While this meant that the level of difficulty and progression of material was not as consistent or sequential as it could have been, the benefit of this was that each session had its own dynamic depending on the proficiency of the other students, the teachers, and the course material. The interactive method of teaching created by the program, which emphasized group work, conversational skills, focused in depth on a particular cultural theme (such as weddings, the workplace, and the environment) and made use of many grammar and vocabulary exercises, made for a rich and productive classroom environment.

While classes helped me build skills more formally, it was interactions outside of the classroom that led to dramatic improvements in my speaking and understanding Greek. The many cultural events that the group attended, where we were expected to speak in Greek not only with our fellow students but with native speakers, transformed my ear for the language and for culture. We attended many events: a traditional panegyri, musical performances, puppet theater, museums (The Museum of Asia Minor, where we were given a personal tour, and the Theophilus Museum) even fashion shows. We visited a potter's workshop, monasteries, attended the opening of a show of traditional pottery, and spoke with the founder of a women's agricultural cooperative, musicians, and restaurant owners, among others. These excursions were a great way to get to know the culture of Lesbos and improve language skills through interactions with native speakers. I even got a feel for some of the colloquial vernacular (on Lesbos, the feminine definite article is sometimes used to refer to proper masculine nouns, for example). Additionally, time spent with other students in the program, many of whose first language was not English, and the staff of the program, meant constant informal practice of Greek. This was perhaps the most helpful aspect of the program, the opportunity to speak Greek all the time.

Participating in the Hellenic Culture Center's Greek Language and Culture Program was an amazing opportunity that helped me to greatly improve my skills with the Greek language in a short and intensive time, preparing me for the research I conducted at Epidaurus on contemporary restagings of ancient theater later in the summer, which provides the basis for my senior thesis research. I would like to wholeheartedly thank the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the Hellenic Department at Yale University for this opportunity and for their support, without which my senior thesis would not have been possible.