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Niarchos Language Fellowship Grant

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*Final Report: A Summer in Mytilini*

As a Greek-Mexican-American, I often felt while growing up that my mother's heritage overwhelmed that of my father's. Naturally, the multitudes of Mexican restaurants, Hispanic grocery stores, and Spanish-speaking neighbors that surrounded me during my childhood prompted me to relate more with Latinos than with Greeks. However, the older I became, the more I longed to learn more about my father's nationality. Above all things, the language barrier between one half of my family and myself was intolerable. Indeed, the more introspective I became, the more I convinced myself that I must learn Greek.

My campus visit to Yale University in the fall of my junior year in high school included an impromptu visit to the Hellenic Department in Luce Hall, and later when I was fortunate enough to be accepted by Yale, I immediately knew that I would select Greek as my foreign language. I found Greek class very interesting and instructive, but as my freshman year of college progressed, I still did not feel that I possessed adequate conversational skills. Luckily, I spoke to a student in intermediate Greek who informed me of the AEOLIS summer program in Lesvos and of the Niarchos Language Fellowship Grant. When I was selected to receive funding, I was very excited about the opportunity to learn and practice only Greek for six weeks.

The AEOLIS program in Lesvos exceeded my expectations. From the moment I arrived at the hotel where we all were to live and study, I was warmly welcomed and reassured that although I did not understand much at that moment, it would be only a few days before I would loosen up and begin speaking much more freely in Greek. In fact, they were entirely correct. It took about two days before I lost my self-consciousness and began speaking and understanding better.

Once classes began, I literally understood more and more of the conversation held at our dinners every evening. I was amazed at my own progress and at that of my fellow classmate from Yale. Also, I became increasingly vocal and capable of conversation with each passing day. I can credit this speedy improvement to two major aspects of the program's curriculum.

The first aspect is, of course, the classroom division and class organization. My fellow Yale and myself were by far the least knowledgeable and proficient in Greek, but we were not placed in a class of our own those first two weeks. Rather, we were grouped with other students who had participated in the program before and who were truly intermediates. This improved our learning to a great degree because we had the opportunity to hear people converse well and ask questions correctly in Greek. By the end of the first two weeks, we had almost reached the same level of fluency as the other intermediate students. Also, it is important to note that the four hours of class were divided very efficiently. The first two hours were largely devoted to grammar, and after a

short break to enjoy some sun, frappes, and cookies with our classmates, we spent the last two hours reading passages and stories, learning new vocabulary, and playing games to improve our comprehension. The majority of homework assignments that we received were relevant and constructive, although some teachers were better in this area than others.

The second aspect, which I believe was the most instrumental to my improvement, was the program's strict rule that only Greek be spoken out of the classroom. Of course this rule had to be bent slightly, especially in the beginning, for students like me who occasionally had very important questions which required English discussion, but to a large extent everyone involved with the program obeyed this order. The fact that I quickly felt comfortable with my teachers and the other students allowed me to speak, be corrected, and feel unembarrassed. I can argue that I learned almost as much from all the time I spent with others on the beach and in the taverns as I did in class. One major reason that this tactic was so successful is that every student was as dedicated to becoming proficient in Greek as we were. For example, the large majority of students were from Spain, and I was very worried that it would be difficult to refrain from speaking Spanish together; however, even when no teacher, director, or other person affiliated with the program was around, only Greek was spoken. Translation was always offered, however, whenever I was really stumped.

Apart from the acquisition of language skills, one of the greatest discoveries that I made in Greece was that of the Greek culture. The program offered afternoon activities on a daily basis that were geared toward cultural understanding. These activities ranged from cooking and dancing lessons, to movie presentations, to trips to the museum, to music concerts and Greek singing lessons. The outings were always enjoyable, and almost all of them provided me with some insight into Hellenic history and culture. One of my favorite outings was the trip to the Museum of Asia Minor. This museum offered me a glimpse into the lives of thousands of refugees and a piece of their history. The first time that I visited this museum, I had only been in Greece for four days, and I had to have a translator for the entire presentation. However, when I went again near the end of my visit, I understood roughly two thirds of it on my own (and the other third of the presentation involved vocabulary about refugee and political scenarios that I had never studied).

Since I have written about how productive and ultimately successful I believe this program is, it should also follow that it is not easy. Someone wishing to take this summer course must fully understand the work involved and must be willing to spend at least six hours a day doing Greek school work (four hours in class and around two hours of homework). Additionally, it can get very frustrating when one cannot express herself the way she wishes. When someone decides to participate in this program, they must believe that learning Greek well is ultimately worth spending an entire summer unable to speak her own language and only able to comprehend about half, or at best two thirds, or what is being said in every conversation. Additionally, all the other students in this program were middle aged, with the exception of a couple students in their thirties and a handful over seventy. I had an excellent time with my classmates, and I found them all very relatable, but it was difficult at times when I hadn't seen or spoken to anyone my age in

over a month. None of these things which I have mentioned hindered my progress in the slightest, they are merely facts which I believe anyone seriously considering the program should consider before committing.

However, I would also proclaim to any prospective student that the benefits of this program more than outweigh the occasional feeling of social isolation. Not only did I learn a language fundamentally intrinsic to who I am, I also made friends of many nationalities, including many friends in Greece with whom I am still in touch. I also made great strides in simultaneously understanding a culture and getting a new perspective on my father and myself.

I want to conclude this report with a story that shows that the value of my experience in Greece was well worth what the Niarchos Language Fellowship Grant generously gave me. On my way to Lesbos, I was greeted in the Athens airport by my aunt and uncle who wished only to see me and send me off with a hug. We spent the entirety of my layover in awkward silence, as neither they spoke English nor I Greek. Upon my return journey to the United States, however, I spent the night with them in Athens, and their initial lack of faith in me was apparent by the utter delight and surprise they demonstrated when they found that I could easily speak to them in all tenses in their own language. Especially at that time, when I had barely spoken anything but Greek for so long, I felt more than comfortable eating dinner and speaking with my aunt, uncle, three cousins, and all their girlfriends. It was the most accomplished that I had felt in a very long time, and everyone kept asking me how I had managed to learn so much in only six weeks.

I am so glad that I applied for this grant and that I participated in this program. It allowed me the opportunity to spend my summer doing something that I had truly longed to do for so long. I feel much more comfortable with understanding who I am and where I come from. Now that I can speak with family members who were previously no more than near strangers to me, I wonder how I ever managed without this faculty. This 180-degree shift in my family ties and relationships, more than anything else, is the most important evidence that what I learned this past summer has changed me permanently.