Community Leaders

TNH Staff

In a very rare, if not unique, interview in the Greek-American press, the famous artist and humanitarian with a Hellenic soul, Erika Spyropoulos, opened her heart to The National Herald. Unraveling her memories, she recounted the experiences of the course of her life, which began in the city of Cottbus, south of Berlin, and continued to Kaltenkirchen, north of Hamburg, where she lived through the dramatic events of the Second World War. The cosmopolitan Stockholm offered a refuge during her student years. There she met the love of her life, the student then, Theodore G. Spyropoulos. Kalavryta, the birthplace of her beloved, was the second stop of her course. Encountering Greek hospitality, charmed by and filling her soul with the “Apollonian light blue Greek sky,” she was renewed and inspired. Chasing dreams of a better life, she migrated with her daughter Mariyana and her husband to Chicago where with hard work, perseverance and patience helped develop her family enterprise. Their professional success allows Erika to devote most of herself, undistracted, to her Art. For 35 years she lived in Beverly Hills, Ill., continuing the tradition of 120 years of the Spyropoulos family in Chicago. Then she moved to Oakbrook. With the heritage of Hellenic values that Erika endorsed, she envisioned a world in which logic, love, peace, virtue, community solidarity and respect for people and nature dominate. She says change begins within ourselves. “We can’t change the world unless we change ourselves,” she said.

For 75 years she lived in Beverly Hills, Calif., continuing the residence of 120 years of the Spyropoulos family in Chicago. Then she moved to Oakbrook. With the heritage of Hellenic values that Erika endorsed, she envisioned a world in which logic, love, peace, virtue, community solidarity and respect for people and nature dominate. She says change begins within ourselves. “We can’t change the world unless we change ourselves,” she said. "The art of forgiving is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness. Besides, we should live in the ‘now’ and enjoy the most that life offers us. From the past you draw lessons and only in the present can you shape the future,” she said. "We Eleazar Rozenski-everyone put it, ‘Yesterday is history, tomorrow is mystery, and today is a gift: that’s why they call it the present.’"
elist and poet of the 19th century Theodor Storm.

With tenacity and struggling with the difficulties of the period, she studied fashion design, painting and architecture at the Meisterschule für Mode in Hamburg.

After completing her studies and in search of direction, she visited Sweden where family friends lived. She decided to settle there as neutral Sweden had not paid the price of war, and particularly Stockholm at that time was a magical place for young people. She kept up her studies while teaching German to young people. She continued to paint by night and captured her thoughts in writing.

In cosmopolitan Stockholm, she found recreation in the evenings at popular bohemian clubs, where artists and young people met to escape the nightmare of the past. There she met the man who was to change her life, Theodore G. Spyropoulos. At that time, he was studying political science.

"From the moment I set my eyes on him, I knew that I would spend the rest of my life with him," she told us. "In Theodore, a true and unexpected 'gift of God' for me, I found the joy of friendship, companionship, love and life. We shared experiences as he also held within his soul traumatic experiences of the Holocaust in his homeland. Theodore Spyropoulos had lived through the great drama of Kalavryta in 1943, witnessing the mass executions of his compatriots by the Germans, from which by a miracle his father was spared. So the two young people in love turned a page of their lives and with renewed hope and optimism, began a new chapter.

In our youthful souls, warfare, regardless of its aims and its origins was as detestable as any form of violence. It is my hope and prayer," says Mrs. Spyropoulos, "that nations soon find other ways of settling their disputes, mainly through dialogue, that no generation in the future may live through what we experienced."
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In 2001 Erika designed a calendar featuring her paintings of Greek Mythology. This was followed by a collection in 2004 titled “The Apokalypsis.” She was the cover designer for the book “The Blight of Asia” by George Hormo.

“Giving is Living” says Erika. She donates her paintings to auction, such as the Amherst College Art Auction. This year she will give particular emphasis to “Plant Your Roots in Greece,” of which she is a founding member and serves actively on its Board of Directors.

With particular sensitivity to the environment, she takes initiatives and offers financial support to “Plant Your Roots in Greece,” which has 15 years has sponsored and coordinated tree-planting activities in many regions in Greece. Every year, she organizes the masterpiece garden openings and deposits the revenue from the tickets with the Pan-American Organization for Private Gardens. Ecological gardening and love for animals is her daily preoccupation. Love of animals is a greatness found in “coming together as a community and respect toward Creation. We must live in harmony with nature and its creatures if we want to achieve peace between.”

Erikk recently presented a new calendar at the Garden House of Simon Fraser University in Canada. The theme of the exhibition “The Garden House and Nautical Paintings.” The exhibit was organized by the Committee of Arts and Letters of the Vancouver chapter of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. Mrs. Spyropoulos donated all the proceeds to support the charitable work of the organization.

Erika designed and sponsored a great deal of exhibitions that contributes to addressing the humanitarian needs in Greece and Canada. The question she always ask about philanthropy? “Philanthropy as a term should not ex- ist. It is redundant. It goes with giving. It is a natural thing to do. It is a part of who we are. I am giving and looking to the extent of my abilities as an expression of solidarity and companionship to follow humanity’s need, both my husband and I experienced poverty and discrimination in our youth. In recognition of her artistic and social contributions, a few weeks ago she was appointed Commissioner on the Hellenic Arts Council by Governor Patrick Quinn. The council consists of prominent Chicagoans who partake of the Hellenic education.

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She exhibits particular sensitivity toward Greek language education. The foundation she created with her husband gave scholarships, and supported school and university programs, student exchanges with Greece, as well as conferences on the promotion and dissemination of Greek Culture and Education. The foundation, which is housed in a building at 5941 N. Milwaukee Ave, Chicago, IL 60646, has recently approved the Cultural Center of Chicago as an accredited examination center for the certification of attainment in Greek. For her contribution to the support of Greek language education, the Federation of Greek-American Educators in America inducted Mrs. Spyropoulos into the Arthur Diamantaris Teachers Association “Pronamika” and the Hellenic-American Women’s Council (HAWC) honored her last May with the “Valkia Athena” award at a special event at the Grand Prospect Hall in Brooklyn, N.Y.

“WHAT THE MIND AND HEART IS TO A MAN, GREECE IS FOR MANKind.”

For the organized Greek-American community today, Erika observes, “We need to listen to young people. To have a better future for young people, our country. The world is changing rapidly and organizations must be more responsive to the needs of today’s reality, expressing modern and universal values.”

She asks Erika about her success in literature and, she told us: “Every day we review our dreams and our goals. Because just as Aristotle said, ‘Change itself is real, constant and necessary for the life of the cosmos, just as the river flows and changes its way every day. As humans we learn our lessons through our experiences, we mature emotionally, we change internally and spiritually, we become selfless people.”

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She revealed, however, that along with her husband and co-founder, they focus their efforts on a new endeavor: the use of social media to solve the problems of Greek and international societies by promoting critical thinking with humanism.

She concludes, “Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts, and I congratulate the generations to come. We need to understand the Greek world is a way of life for Erika. She donates her paintings to Greek-American foundations for auctions, as well as the American Hellenic Institute and the environmental foundation “Plants Your Roots in Greece,” which is housed in a building at 5941 N. Milwaukee Ave, Chicago, IL 60646.

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1. At the general assembly of the Hellenic-American National Council in Clearwater, Fl. In 2005 with husband T.G. Spyropoulos, during the unveiling ceremony for the bust of the first Greek immigrant to the USA. 2. For her contribution to the support of Greek language education, the Federation of Greek-American Educators in cooperation with the Greek Teachers Association “Prometheus” and the Hellenic-American Women’s Council (HAWC) honored her last May with the “Pallas Athena” award at a special event at the Grand Prospect Hall in Brooklyn, NY. Here she is shown with the event’s Mistress of Ceremonies Dora Klissas and Stella Kokkolis, president of the Federation of Greek-American Educators.