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Embracing Visibility in the New York City Greek Parade

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By Maria Souris Taketzis

A Journey….

I had trepidations about parading in a wheelchair.

Let’s begin from the start of my journey.

My husband Stelios brought along a rather large flag to attach to the back of the wheelchair while I paraded. I felt an uneasiness as this flag would make me far from ‘invisible’. I was hoping to blend in with my community The Archangel Michael Greek Orthodox Church of Port Washington. I was hoping not to be noticed.
This was a foreign emotion; I never felt self-conscious in my wheelchair. It is simply my ‘legs’. Why? Why was I uneasy?

My family and I met at 63rd Street, having the good luck and honor of being a few yards away from the Evzones. I felt their energy in my core.

Stelios attached the flag to the back of the wheelchair. A wind blew and my face was a bit tangled in the flag.

Leonidas, my two-and-a-half-year-old grandson, climbed onto my lap, flag still around my face. Yiayia …you gweek wite? (Translation… Yiayia you’re Greek right?)

Leonidas managed to get under the flag and pressed his head against mine. In a few moments a bit of rain started; it didn’t last long but Leonidas and I were unintentionally ‘sheltered’.

It was time to start moving with our group. You need to know that my wheelchair weighs 450 pounds. It would be unwise to be in the midst of the marchers. What was I thinking when saying, I would just blend in.

My family wisely decided to be the tail end of our community. We were a group comprised of: Leonidas, one year old Charlie, my daughters Alexandra and

Katerina, Stelios, Michael my ‘xeno’ son in law (a word he decided to use when needed), and myself in my wheelchair with a large flag blowing with the wind.

Leonidas waving his flag and going in and out of the double stroller. Charlie mesmerized by the sounds and people. The three older ‘kids’ taking turns watching the little ones. I was following the green line on the pavement with my husband by my side. He proudly wore all his pins of various organizations he belongs to, and of course his signature beret.

Only a few minutes passed, and I felt confidence. And most importantly I felt proud and happy. Many watching the parade called out my name; “Bravo Maria”.

It was indeed awesome when one of the parade announcers and COSMOS FM volunteer Michael Stratis gave Stelio and me a shoutout.

I am truly grateful for all the ‘bravo Maria’, but I didn’t do anything more than parade with my mode used for ‘walking’.

But if my parading gave someone with any disability a touch of dignity, or any positive emotion, then I know why Stelios pushed me to parade and be seen.

My hope is that no one looks away from any type of disability, (many are invisible to the naked eye so always keep that open mind). My yiayia used to say that when you grow old people treat you like a child because you may not hear well or talk as quickly. So you sit quietly in the ‘corner’ taking it all in.

I guess maybe yiayia’s wise words could be applied to anyone that is ‘different’.

The end of this journey ends with this…. I have no trepidations of being seen and heard. Thank you to the parade organizers for a magnificent parade, my parish, my family, my xeno, – once you march in the Greek parade you forfeit the rights to that word- my Leonidas who knows “we gweek, wite?”, and to Stelio for convincing me to march an wave the flag. It completed a perfect day.

Maria Souris Taketzis is a volunteer patient advocate, an ALS patient and researcher.

Her husband, Stelios Taketzis (photo), is an Ocean Transportation executive and the Chairman of GAEPIS/COSMOS FM Board of Directors.

Photo: GOARCH/Brittainy Newman

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