

Alpha Omega Council turns 50, with a nod to Isocrates



BOSTON — “You stole a little bit of my thunder,” Alpha Omega Council President Costa Speliakos said into the microphone, addressing Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, who had just spoken. Onstage before 500 guests in the Fairmont Copley Plaza’s Grand Ballroom for the Council’s 50th anniversary gala Oct. 2, Speliakos nodded: “We are all on the same wavelength.”

Speliakos was referring to an idea the Archbishop had drawn from Isocrates after offering the invocation: that Greek identity rests on shared education and culture, not ancestry alone. “The Greeks are the seedbed of Western civilization,” the Archbishop said, emphasizing that the Hellenic inheritance could be shared by anyone who embraced its ideals. In that spirit, Alpha Omega “welcomes one and all,” he said, citing a condensed version of Isocrates’ words inscribed on the Gennadius Library in Athens: “Those who partake of our culture are called ‘Greeks.’”



Archbishop Elpidophoros of America addresses guests at the Alpha Omega Council's 50th anniversary gala. Drawing on Isocrates, he emphasized that Greek identity rests on shared education and culture, not ancestry alone. (Orthodox Observer/Areti Bratsis)

The black-tie gala opened a three-day anniversary weekend. Co-chairman Bill Galatis welcomed guests, and Dr. Vivian Paraskevi Douglas and Peter Costarakis performed the national anthems of Greece and the United States. The master of ceremonies was John Metaxas, who joined CNN in 1994 and anchored several of its financial news programs, including “Your Money.”

Peter Agris, publisher of The Hellenic Chronicle, founded the Council in 1976 to bring Greek American professionals together for fellowship and good works. Its 10 incorporators, the Council’s anniversary film recalls, were sons of the boys who came over in the early 1900s: doctors, judges, scientists and government officials at the height of their careers. “There was an auspicious beginning to this wonderful endeavor, and the Omega point is not even yet on the horizon,” Archbishop Elpidophoros said.

"Fifty years ago, a handful of visionaries had an idea, and tonight that idea fills this room," said Harry J. Vlachos, whose term as the Council's 38th president ended two days before the gala. Today the Council hosts Greek Heritage Night with the Boston Red Sox, a golf classic and a student essay contest on the Battle of Marathon, and helps crown Boston Marathon winners.

The custom dates to the early 1930s, when George C. Demeter, a Greek American state legislator, took it upon himself to meet the winners at the finish line with laurel wreaths from Greece. Agris, then-Gov. Michael Dukakis and others made it official in 1984. Since then, Greece's consulate in Boston and the Council have supplied olive wreaths cut in Marathon, Greece, for the men's and women's champions in the running and wheelchair divisions.

Metropolitan Methodios of Boston thanked individual Alpha Omega members for their generous contributions to the St. Methodios Faith and Heritage Center in New Hampshire, including its chapel, cafeteria, soccer field and new indoor sports facilities.

The Founders' Award went to Nancy Agris Savage, the founder's daughter. A former senior House Foreign Affairs Committee aide, she succeeded her father at The Hellenic Chronicle. The paper was "like the sibling that got all the attention," she said. Her father met her mother, a disc jockey, while buying an ad on a small Greek radio show in New Hampshire. Each of us, she said, is "a living museum of the immigrants who came here for a better life." She is now leading the newspaper's digitization project, which received early support from the Alpha Omega council.

Boston University received the Philhellene Award, which honors champions of Hellenism, Greek or not. Kelly Polychroniou, head of BU's Modern Greek language program, accepted it for President Melissa L. Gilliam, who could not attend. She noted that in 1877, Boston University awarded Helen Magill White a Ph.D. in Greek, making her the first woman to earn a Ph.D. from an American university. BU is now working with the University of Athens on semester and yearlong study there, she said.

Telemachus "T.A." Demoulas, a fourth-generation member of Market Basket's founding family, received the Emerging Leader Award. His great-grandfather Athanasios, he said, landed in New York on St. Patrick's Day and took the celebrations for a welcome meant for the Greeks. They honored the patron saint of the Irish. Athanasios went back to Greece in 1912 for the First Balkan War, then

returned and settled in Lowell, Massachusetts. In 1917 he and his wife, Efrosini, both from Kalambaka, Greece, opened Demoulas Market, a small grocery specializing in lamb. It stood in the Acre, a neighborhood first settled by Irish canal workers and later known as Lowell's Greektown.

The store made it through the Great Depression largely on credit. Demoulas said his great-grandfather credited the immigrant neighbors who came in every day, the French, the Irish and the Greeks, with keeping it open. The Irish, it turned out, had welcomed him after all. His grandfather and namesake, Telemachus, left high school as a sophomore to help save the store from foreclosure. It grew into Market Basket, one of New England's largest grocery chains.



Recipients of the Peter Agris Memorial Awards pose with awards organizer Nancy Agris Savage at the Alpha Omega Council's 50th anniversary gala in Boston. From left to right: Theodora Tsevas, Fotini Anastopoulos, Tyler Davis, Nancy Agris Savage, Maria Manousakis, Christian Andriolas and Calista Sybrant. (Orthodox Observer/Areti Bratsis)

The Peter Agris Memorial Awards, which Agris Savage has run for more than 30 years, have given nearly \$1 million to students. This year's recipients are Fotini Anastopoulos, Christian Andriolas, Tyler Davis, Maria Manousakis, Calista Sybrant and Theodora Tsevas. "I think that at a time when our democracy is in peril and the concept of truth is under attack, your young journalists here give me hope that things can be better for the future," Metaxas said, wishing them "the courage to pursue the truth."

Greek singer Konstantinos Argiros was also honored. The next night, he drew an impressive crowd to BU's Agganis Arena for his Boston concert debut.

Speliakos promised a more visible Council that reaches beyond its own events. He called for closer work with educators, universities and cultural institutions, and a greater role for younger leaders. "Our heritage is extraordinary, but heritage survives only when it is shared," he said.

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