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President Kanellis interviewed on Kathimerini

The miracle that is the American Farm School today was highlighted in the highly reputable newspaper Kathimerini's recent interview with American Farm School and Perrotis College President, Dr. Panos Kanellis.

Before I was welcomed into the director's residence on the sprawling grounds of the American Farm School (AFS) in Thessaloniki, northern Greece, I was given an extensive tour of the campus: the daycare center, the kindergarten, elementary school, the general high school and training college, Perrotis College, which offers graduate and postgraduate studies, the areas where the school rears turkeys and cultivates snails, and the students' vegetable garden. I was awestruck by the overall sense of tidiness, the wonderful buildings and gardens, the high level of organization.

Like most people living in Athens, I knew AFS as the source of fresh milk, traditional yogurt, Omega-3 eggs, cheese, hylopites pasta, trahana cracked wheat and premium turkey, but I had no idea just how wonderful a place it is, located just a few kilometers from Thessaloniki's airport.



AFS grew out of the efforts of an American missionary and his wife to teach orphan boys how to farm and rear animals in the city when it was still a part of the Ottoman Empire, in 1904. Today it is a pioneer in agricultural education, and soon, with the addition of a middle school, it will be in a position to offer every level of education.

Drenched from a rainstorm but excited, I met director Panos Kanellis at the entrance of his home. With the rangy grace of a former athlete, he escorted me into his hospitable living room, where brunch was laid out on the table. As is customary on such occasions, we began our conversation with his own story – an impressive tale of a self-made man – and his connection to AFS.

Dr Kanellis was born in Thessaloniki in 1947 to parents who had fled from Asia Minor, and grew up hearing stories of the old homeland. "What I remember hearing all the time was that I needed to work hard to become successful, that there is no shame in any work," he recalled.

After studies at Anatolia College and a basketball career with Iraklis, he went to Texas to study chemistry and immediately got a job so he wouldn't have to rely on his parents' support. Kanellis spent 13 years in the United States and decided to move back to Greece after the birth of his daughter, starting out in business in Thessaloniki and then taking a job at his alma mater, where he worked from 1997 to 2009, reaching the position of vice president. This was all the experience he needed to head the American Farm School.

"I knew of the school, like all locals, but when I went for the job interview, I didn't know where the administration building was located," Kanellis recounted. "As I wandered around, I came across a group of teenagers who had just finished a class and were heading to a practical lesson carrying farm tools. When I asked them whether they liked it here, they said they loved it. They exuded such joy and optimism that I told myself, 'I'm going to get the job.'"

Proud students

The success of AFS, said Kanellis, lies in the pride of its students to work the land. “Our students have overcome the belief of many Greeks that farming, be it crops or livestock, is a career associated with poverty and hardship,” he said. “Many of the negative reactions when we go to talk about our programs and postgraduate degrees at schools come from the teachers and not the students. So many people still believe that children need to aim for the National Technical University or Law School. They have no vision of what this country needs and have no idea that farming can offer a balanced life and a successful career. That’s one of the reasons why we have a crisis right now. Efforts need to be made to change this mentality.”

When Kanellis took over at the school in late 2009, the Greek media were full of stories about young people returning to their native villages to try to make a living from the land. This trend prompted him to establish a center to help these people get started in the business of agriculture. “We don’t just teach them a thing or two about farming, we teach them all about life in a village,” he said.

His second major initiative was for the school to start offering every level of education, from kindergarten to university. “The idea was that while all of our high school graduates may not end up becoming farmers or getting jobs in the agricultural and food sectors, all of them will know first-hand how to look after the environment, how to live like responsible citizens in harmony with nature, how to respect farmwork and how to recognize good food,” said Kanellis. “This is knowledge that needs to be instilled at a young age and I believe it is an amazing resource for the times ahead. Our students are as familiar with a rake as they are with their cell phones. This makes them happy and balanced people.”

AFS is a not-for-profit organization that is closely tied with the United States in terms of administration and donations, a bond that also permeates its philosophy and cultivates a mentality of excellence. I asked its director whether the success of the school could make residents of Thessaloniki more open to the idea of more private colleges and universities, something many Greeks remain opposed to.

Public education

“The day that Perrotis College is in a position to offer degrees that are recognized by the Greek state, that are equal to those from a state university, we will be inundated with applications,” he said confidently. “There are a lot of professors and students at public universities who are committed to education but the environment does not favor them. This is something that harms all Greeks: that the level of public education could be better. The lack of a plan is not the problem; the lack of political will is. Support is needed from every quarter for the situation to change. Instead, we are witnessing takeovers of universities by groups that are not even enrolled there, attacks, filth and neglect. In the meantime, foreign universities are surging ahead in every area of education as Greece struggles to keep up.”

For Kanellis, the tools AFS provides to its students are instrumental.

“Nothing is possible without knowledge,” he said. “For anyone to be a good farmer today, they need scientific knowledge. Everything has changed since the time that crop farmers drenched everything in pesticide, polluting the water table and unknowingly causing illness. Now everyone needs to adapt to modern practices.”

Alternative Tourism program in collaboration with Rutgers

The American Farm School, in collaboration with Rutgers University, is offering a unique training program on Alternative Tourism as part of the “Recharging the Youth: New Agriculture for the New Generation” project funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. The program is two semesters long and is offered in Thessaloniki, Ioannina, and Volos. After completion, exceptional participants have the opportunity to complete a paid, two-month apprenticeship at select alternative tourism businesses collaborating with the program.

The Alternative Tourism program is a creative workshop, as theoretical training is based on interaction and participatory learning, in addition to its inclusion of educational visits and a keynote speaker series. The intensive program promises to provide fruitful academic experiences, extensive theoretical instruction, and experiential learning opportunities for all participants.



The bright future of High School senior Athina Mpekas

Finding themselves at a crossroads after graduation, many young Greeks face professional uncertainty and risk. The agri-food sector, however, offers ample opportunities to those with the right knowledge and training. Athina Mpekas, American Farm School high school graduating senior and daughter of AFS alum Yannis Mpekas is a firm believer in the strong potential associated with a career path in agri-food as she plans for her future.

Her father's experiences at the School helped him start his own business and inspired both his children to study at AFS. Like father like daughter, Athina similarly looks forward to working with her family to grow their buffalo milk production business following her graduation. With optimism and excitement, she speaks often about how her experience at AFS will help her succeed. "No other place can provide young people with the knowledge that I've gained here - from the classes to the labs and the practical training. Here, I learned what food science and technology is how to measure the pH levels of food products, and how to calculate fat content. Furthermore, I was given all the theoretical background necessary to understand the practical application of my studies."

The rich intellectual background provided by the School will further give Athina the necessary skills to distinguish herself in a business that is still overwhelmingly male-dominated. She hopes to expand the scope of her family's buffalo-milk products, taking the reach of their business abroad. "My ultimate goal is for buffalo-milk products to be better known, both in Greece and abroad."



Lights...camera...action!

Congratulations to our high school Cinematography Club for their first-place win (their eighth accolade in the last six years!) at the student short film competition organized by the Jewish Museum of Greece and the Ministry of Education. Films were evaluated according to their relevance, originality, performance aesthetics, and ability to adhere to the competition guidelines. The competition's theme was "The Holocaust and the Greek Jews," an important topic for Greece and a significant part of Thessaloniki's unique history.



The eleven students did their own casting and acting, directed the production, and edited the final product. Their film, “The Chase,” drew comparisons between the persecution of the Greek Jews by Nazi Germans during WWII and bullying taking place in schools today.

Three of the club members will go on to participate in an educational program sponsored by the Jewish Museum of Greece which will include a visit to Auschwitz in Poland.

From Malawi to Thessaloniki: the remarkable journey of Grigoris Giannakis

He had monkeys as pets when he was a child. Elephants wandered through his family plantation on their way to Mozambique. He was raised on stories about lion and crocodile attacks. Such was the youth of Grigoris Giannakis, a third-generation Greek born and raised in the country of Malawi. Currently pursuing his undergraduate degree in Precision Agriculture at Perrotis College, he is staunchly proud of both of his homelands and his unique background. Before deciding to pursue his degree, Grigoris spent a year helping his father with the family business – a tobacco farm with several hundred acres, and a poultry farm with 34,000 chickens. His year of service inspired him to pursue a degree in Precision Agriculture at Perrotis College. “I continue to be wowed by the methodology, professionalism, and commitment to excellence at this School,” he said, speaking about how fulfilling and rewarding he has found his experience to be. Grigoris is graduating soon with a BSc degree. Armed with his solid education from Perrotis College, he eagerly looks forward to returning to Malawi, excited and ready to give back to his local community and his family's farm.



A unique PeaceJam experience

Sixteen AFS high school students recently attended the first ever PeaceJam Greece conference in Athens and participated in workshops with non-profit organizations to learn about leadership and service programs in Greece.

They also created a short video presentation on recent PeaceJam projects, including Project LifeBag, which won the Billion Acts of Peace Award in 2016. Through Project LifeBag, students filled over 600 backpacks with supplies that were distributed to refugee children in camps in northern Greece. The conference further served as a platform for participants to discuss their plans for the next phase of the project, LearnBags: a program that will provide refugee children with school supplies and help them integrate into the Greek school system.





The two-day event concluded with a talk by Nobel Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, leaving the participants moved about PeaceJam's work in Greece. Two of our students even had the honor of sharing a meal with him during the event. One thing is certain; upon the conclusion of the conference, everyone left feeling enthused and reinvigorated inspired to make a positive change in their communities and the world.

BalkanRoad: Sustainable Management Strategies in Agriculture

BalkanRoad is a project funded by the European Union and implemented by the School's Strategic Projects Management Office. It aims to develop a road map towards the creation of farms with a zero carbon, zero waste, low water consumption, and a small footprint.

The project has two main goals:

1. Improving the agricultural environment in the Balkans through the development of strategies, methodologies, and technologies for natural resource conservation (such as soil, water, and air), the reduction of GHGs, the reduction of waste generation/disposal, and the enlargement of the recycle/reuse ratio in farm systems;
2. Developing a common protocol for Balkan countries to produce eco-labeled agricultural products, by putting in force sustainable practices throughout the entire production line (i.e. from the field to the market) so that the final products will have a measurable, comparable, and lowest possible environmental footprint.

By accomplishing these joint goals, the project hopes to expand trade horizons for agricultural products produced in the Balkans and boost local and national economies.

This exciting new venture is being pursued through the collaboration of the American Farm School and the Benaki Phytopathological Institute, the Institute for Mediterranean Studies, the Open University of Cyprus, the Association of Agri-Environmental Farmers in Bulgaria, the Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania, and the Organic Producers Federation of F.Y.R.O.M.



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