

Saint Demetrios Greek American School of Astoria

"The Greek Letters are what distinguishes us from others. They offer to us respectability because the Greek Letters have preceded us whenever we have ventured. They have been included in subject classes of foreign schools, they have inspired non-Greeks to adopt Greek names and they have inundated many a foreign language with their linguistic technical rules to the extent that today the Greek language has become the language of the scientist and science and of academicians around the world." Archbishop Iakovos January 28, 1961

The Greek Orthodox Church has been the support system of every Greek community. This tradition reaches back to Ottoman times, where every religious community was autonomous and supervised by the head priest of that particular community, who in turn was supervised by the patriarch of Constantinople or the head of the Greek Orthodox Church. Churches then had a significant impact on the lives of its parishioners, as both their spiritual and political representatives in the world. With that in mind, it is no surprise that the first thing the Greek immigrant sought to do upon arriving in America was to create a church.

The St. Demetrios community was not founded until 1923. Up until then Astoria was not a Greek community. It consisted of a few Germans and Hungarians but had no great cultural hub. The first Greek family to migrate to Astoria was the Stathopoulou family from Magoula, Sparta. Eventually more and more Greeks decided to plant their roots in Astoria and become part of what is now the largest Greek-Orthodox community in the United States. The first meeting of the community consisted of 27 Greeks including parishioners from both Astoria and Corona. There they elected a president: Alexandros Goutas. He was considered enthusiastic and best equipped

to serve as a leader. They gave the community its first name: Hellenic Realty. The gathering took place at the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, and then located down the street where the St. Demetrios Cathedral currently stands. Archbishop Alexander Rodostolou ultimately granted the group consent to conduct services and afternoon Greek classes at the Saint Athanasios church, which stood directly across from the modern-day St. Demetrios Cathedral.

The chapel was very small and could not service the needs of a growing parish, so the group occasionally would ask the nearby Protestant parish to use its space. Some thought it was very demeaning to be forced to use another faith's church, and thus the idea to build their own church was conceived. In February 1927, the community decided to expand and purchased additional property. The amount of \$3,500 was raised through fundraising and donations. The parish immediately appointed K. Georgiou as an architect to design the structure. Unfortunately the \$75,000 price tag was out of reach — especially since the Greeks were not a wealthy minority — and the plans had to be delayed. At the time the community members were made up of small-time business owners, furriers, florists, tailors, bakers and the like. Despite limited economic means, the community was able to save \$25,000 to build the basement level of the church structure. This alone was a great achievement.

On Nov. 7, 1927, board members gathered to establish a charter with the state of New York under the official name of “Hellenic Orthodox Community of Astoria, St. Demetrios Inc.” They placed the first brick twenty days later, and in six months, construction was completed. On April 1, 1928, they consecrated the basement as the first official church building. They created an ecclesiastical council with Goutas as its head and the Rev. Metropolitan Germanos Polzoidis as the first priest.

Concurrent with the start of the church, the community immediately launched afternoon schools, though classes had been ongoing for a few years already. Polzoidis also served as a

teacher with the support of assistant teacher Matsoukis, and the duo maintained a steady enrollment of 12 students. Classes were held at Public School 122, which offered more space. There, students had lessons in religion, customs, and traditions and, most importantly, the Greek language.

The 1930s were very difficult for the community. The St. Demetrios parish struggled through the Great Depression along with the rest of America. Their progress was halted since priorities shifted and people were in survival mode. The building of the church didn't resume until 1936.

Educating the First Generation of Greek Americans

1940-1960

The church eventually opened its doors in 1942, but the interior was not furnished and decorated until 1947. This finally gave the Greek community in Astoria a solid home base from which to advance further in their plans. Their progress once again was hampered by the events of World War II. As both Italy and the Nazis attempted to invade Greece, the church busied itself with preparing care packages to send to the motherland. Their allegiance was to Greece and now funneling money to support the war effort became their priority.

It was also during this decade that the need for expansion became apparent. Not only did the war allow for a slight break in strict immigration laws — 2,000 to 3,000 Greeks were allowed in each year as displaced persons — but the community also grew on its own. Beginning with only 27 people, members of the church married and started families, and naturally more members came through word of mouth. While the church itself was ready for religious services,

the parish still used the basement and Public Schools 5, 85, 122, 10 and 150 to conduct afternoon and Sunday school.

Charles Manos, the president of the community from 1947 to 1948, decided that the land to the left of the church, on 30th Street and 30th Drive, which was for sale, should be purchased. He felt it was a great opportunity for the continued growth of the parish. Under Manos and with the assistance of the Very Rev. Athenagoras Kokkinakis, the community realized that the space would be especially useful to the parish as a center for the youth to gather and socialize. At a meeting on April 18, 1948, the group decided to move forward with the plans. Once again, through donations and fundraising, the sum of \$41,000 was collected, but it fell short of the \$80,000 that was required to build the community center. Plans for constructing the center were postponed indefinitely, but the dream remained alive, and the community continued to raise money.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, more and more immigrants settled in the community. During this time, the United States began accepting refugees of the Greek Civil War. The majority of these individuals gravitated toward Astoria and St. Demetrios as their new home since the area became a culturally familiar place for those who were forced to flee and seek refuge in a foreign land. The growing population became a catalyst for the community. Members of the church board urged more Greeks to join. "I do not know of any community of expatriates that are like the Greek... Anything that happens in our Astoria community represents Greece itself... We have all brought with us, our unique customs and love for our country... We come from so many different parts of Greece... but are united with our love of our faith..." Rev. Demetrios Fragou and the president of the community worked diligently to stir up the members' pride and interest.

By 1951 the community successfully gathered a sum of \$56,000. Although \$45,000 was used to cover expenses, the congregation found themselves with a surplus of \$12,000. This progress would benefit the youth of the community greatly, and everything seemed to be moving steadily forward. By the fall, there were about 20 Sunday school classes and six afternoon school groups being taught in public schools. Among the teachers were Eleni Rodini, Olga Kaloudi, Katerina Dimitriadou and Evagelia Daskalopoulou.

However, as exciting as these advances were, the topic of the community center took the spotlight. By 1953 all attention was on construction of the center. The limited number of community members concerned the parish. Many believed that 950 members were still not enough to support the project at hand. Although all were eager to see the project completed, lack of financial contributions held back their efforts. Frustration and disappointment was evident among the board members. Fragou addressed his parishioners, commenting that “There are many of us who are not members of the church, or there are those who only pay their due when it conveniences them.” It became such an issue that the archdiocese claimed that, “Those who deny to aid the church do not have the right to (come to church) and service his religious needs...” From the financial support of the few members and the backing of the archdiocese, the building efforts resumed. With the official architect, Gustav Iser, the plans of the community center were completed. By the end of 1953, the total amount that had been raised was \$40,000.

The St. Demetrios community board kick-started 1954 with strong outreach efforts. The fight to sign up more members never ceased. Fortunately George Vasileiadis a board member, who was especially eloquent, called for the tightening of the community in order to make the dream of the community center a reality. During the Easter celebration that year, Archbishop Michael Konstantinides visited and accompanied K. Xatsinakis, board president, when he placed the first stone. The Easter celebration proved memorable and the evening ended with the

community \$34,000 richer. With the support of many organizations such as the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, Daughters of Penelope and the Sons of Pericles, the necessary \$80,000 did not seem so impossible to reach.

In December of 1955, the community signed a contract to take out a \$250,000 loan. A great step forward considering the completion of the community center's foundation came soon after. It was predicted that the entire structure was to be completed by September of 1956. The actual grand opening of the Community Center was May 5th 1957. It was a major event attended by Archbishop Michael, who not only congratulated parents, students and the community but also gave a \$5000 gift for the new building, which was to act as a school and an auditorium for gatherings.

Christened the St. Demetrios Day School, the community center was praised by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. An excerpt of an article from the Greek newspaper Atlantis read "We have noted many wonderful episodes since the founding of our expatriate community, St. Demetrios of Astoria of Long Island... They have built this year with great honor the Greek-American day school, the education center of our old yet progressive community... The leaders of this project promise to meet completely the expectations of the community, as our church does, who believe that our children cannot continue our culture and traditions... if they have not experienced Greek education." The newspaper Ethnikos Kirikas wrote, "The community of St. Demetrios Astoria opens a new chapter of its long history in opening the new day school and the grand opening of the community center... This community acts according to affection, of love, and the determination of its members move steadily ahead... The Greek community of Astoria gains new direction in the midst of integrating our children together in a conscious 'Greekness' thanks to this new building..." At that point in time, the day school consisted of 267 students ranging from kindergarten to seventh grade. The classes, staffed by a dozen teachers, were split

up in, and half of classes were taught in English while the other half were given instruction in Greek. The Greek classes were split into nine groups, depending on students' language skills. Students had music and gym classes once a week as extracurricular activities.

The number of students rose to 398 after only two years. While the first through fifth grades all had over 40 students the first and second grades needed to be split into two groups - whereas the sixth grade had 32, the seventh 19. The eighth grade, established that year, had only 16 children. Tuition was affordable \$175.00 per year, a modern equivalent of 1,405. Ever ambitious, the community president of 1959 Theodore P. Demetriou in his report to the general assembly in 1959 stated plans raise the student population to 450 by adding more classes.

After only two years, enrollment rose to 398. While the first through fifth grades all had more than 40 students, the first and second grades needed to be split into two groups because they became overpopulated. The sixth grade group had 32 students while there were 19 seventh-graders. The eighth grade, established that year, had only 16 students. Tuition was affordable at \$175 a year, which is a modern-day equivalent of \$1,405. The ambitious Theodore P. Demetriou, the board president reported to the community general assembly in 1959 that there were plans to raise enrollment to 450 by adding more classes.

Although there was great promise, the day school and community center turned out to be quite a challenge. It was difficult to maintain economically and required much attention from the administration. There were plenty of issues to handle ranging from late registration to paying for bus services and lunch to the admission of poor students. The latter half of the decade was taxing for the board, whose workload included planning and calculating debts and expenses, paying for poor students' tuition and handling the continuous demand for books. Unfortunately the school experienced a deficit of \$5,000 from 1957 to 1958. The opening of a new school meant paying for text books and general supplies, transporting children, janitorial material, etc. Given these

expenses plus unforeseen costs related to the trial-and-error management that comes with any new endeavor, the deficit wasn't surprising. However this deficit spending did not become a habit. Though new to the business of running academic institutions, the community managed to stay within its annual budget of \$85,000 the very next year.

The Expansions of a Growing Community

And the Birth of a New Dream

1960-1980

The new decade ushered in a new school administration plus a new parish president. However the most important change to the local cultural landscape was the second wave of Greek immigration. The sudden flood of new Greeks to accommodate only exasperated the pre-existing problem of limited space.

Immigration from Greece slowed down after the 1920s. The Great Depression and foreign policy played a tremendous role. From 1925 to 1945, fewer than 30,000 Greeks arrived to the United States, and many of these immigrants were "picture brides" for single Greek men. Overall the 1940s and 1950s were slow years for Greek immigration to the United States, with numbers dipping as low as 2,308 for the entirety of the decade. Through the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, 308 Greeks were allowed in annually, with exceptions only for displaced persons or those with family connections. (Scourby, pg. 61) President Harry S. Truman granted relief to 28,000 displaced immigrants on Dec. 22, 1945, but only seven of them were Greek. The Refugee Relief Act of 1953 was slightly more successful, granting entry for 17,000 Greeks.

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which took effect in 1968, abolished the national origins system. This along with the aftermath of World War II, the civil war in

Greece and the general lack of economic opportunities prompted many Greeks to pack their belongings and try their luck elsewhere. But this time the trip would be permanent and not a temporary layover to earn money to bring back to the motherland since many immigrants from this wave were families who planned to establish themselves and plant roots in America. From 1966 to 1971, 86,344 Greeks came to the United States. The distinction between the old and new immigrants would later give rise to problems in the community.

The 1960s a time of revolution and counterculture in America only brought more worries. In 1964 the Clergy Laity Congress began limited authorization for the use of languages other than Greek for ecclesiastical services and continued to loosen restrictions after that. In 1967 Iakovos even stated: “The church knows that the day might come when the Greek language will not be spoken among the Greek-American generations either because of ignorance or necessity... However the church rejects any internal or external pressure for the total replacement of the Greek language in the liturgy or its life in general.” The concessions marked the recognition of the reality of the growing influence of English.

Some began to suggest that Greek should be taught as a second language rather than a first. According to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, which is responsible for the education of Greek-Americans attending Greek schools, in its guiding documents titled “Aims and Program of Archdiocesan Education of 1975,” “Greek should be taught as a second language.” The instructions are spelled out bluntly. If taught as a first language, students would learn to read, write and speak as students in Greece would. However, if taught as a secondary option, students would learn from the perspective of an average American student learning Spanish. This would make English the default mother tongue.

Naturally the St. Demetrios community resisted. In particular Emmanuel Haziemmanuel of the Archdiocese Board of Education wrote a letter to the archdiocese

expressing his shock at the fact that the Greek program was cut by one-third — apparently without the consent of those at Saint Catherine. He went on to comment: “Effective teaching of the Greek language is not only an obligation on our part to the past and the future generations of Greek ancestry but a privilege to teach it and a privilege to learn it on the part of our children.”

The idea of additional expansion of the school was officially mentioned as early as 1960. The archdiocese sent a congratulatory letter to the St. Demetrios community commending them on their efforts to expand their school. This suggestion was well received in the community. Unfortunately the dream of progress clashed with the economic reality. Maintaining a church, funding a day and afternoon school, completing charity work and tending to day-to-day needs were no easy tasks. The 1960s were significantly racked with financial issues. There were several times when the community could not afford to pay even utility bills. However expansion would help alleviate the monetary issues plaguing the parish. The schools already had a waiting list due to the lack of space, so purchasing new land and building out would allow the school to accommodate higher enrollment numbers, which, in turn, would mean more invested members and more income coming into the community. The parish considered renovating the auditorium or community center to split the spaces into classrooms, but that would have been a temporary solution. Instead the board set its sights on the more ambitious pursuit of building not only a new school but an additional church as well.

Despite the financial stress they were facing at the time but with an eye toward future economic stability, the community was determined to expand. Throughout the early 1960s, the board surveyed the area for the expansion plan. A plot on Ditmars Boulevard and 23rd Avenue was for sale, but its proximity to Hell Gate would not be an ideal place for a church. A new plot on 33rd Street became a contender. Its closeness to the Ditmars location, now teeming with Greek immigrants, fit the bill perfectly. In 1968 the land was purchased with the church taking

out a \$250,000 loan from First National Bank. An architect Dean Sideraki was hired, and a contract was signed with Charles Gherardi & Co., the contractors, the following year. With all of the paperwork set, time had come once again to raise the required funds for construction.

The St. Demetrios community knew all too well how difficult it would be to obtain these funds. The overall plan for the church, including the trademark Byzantine domes, would cost more than \$1 million. The groundbreaking ceremony on Sept. 22, 1969, brought in \$115,000. The clergy was charged with the task of covering all of Astoria to spread the word. The clergy was split into two groups with one group covering the east and the other the west. Members went door-to-door collecting cash donations and pledges. By the end of the year, the community collected another \$190,000 in cash and \$330,000 in pledges.

According to the Rev. Father John Antonopoulos, the greatest obstacle of the project was the lack of unity. During his excursions with the other priests, he said they met many indifferent and even outright hostile Greeks. In spite of that fact, the construction of Saint Catherine Greek Orthodox Church proved that though they were a minority group, the Greeks were more than capable of acting. Whether indifferent or not, the project most certainly gained the respect of the entire Greek Community.

The church was completed as promised by Rev. Father John Poulos within 400 days after the contract with Gherardi was signed. With its huge domes the architecture was a testament to the very best of Christian faith and Byzantine inspiration. Theodore Miller, president of the parish council, acted as the “godfather” of the church, donating \$10,000. Those who oversaw its construction namely Miller, Rev. Poulos and others decided to build on a higher point of elevation, which would leave what would later become the first two floors open for free use while the third floor was designated for the church itself. They now had 16 more classrooms. The

new church greatly alleviated the burdens of the overcrowded community and the demand for education.

Saint Catherine's utility was immediately evident. In 1974 students from kindergarten and first grade moved to have classes there, joining the newly established prekindergarten classes. This cleared up some of the congestion at the day school, allowing children on the waiting list to be admitted. This was a considerable achievement for the community.

But now that the dust began to settle post-mass immigration and -construction, tensions arose in the community by the 1970s. There was a stark difference between the "old" and "new" Greeks. The old, established immigrants were mostly poor and illiterate, having come to a new country with nothing. They were not welcomed warmly but rather greeted by Americans with suspicion. Being largely unskilled they had to take up exhausting jobs in manual labor or try to start their own business. Confused and empty-handed, the Greeks united to preserve their religion, language and culture. Through hard work and grit, they created something out of nothing — turning previously empty plots into their own church and school. In contrast the more recent immigrants tended to come from far better off situations. They usually were better educated than their predecessors and in decent financial states. Additionally the landscape of Greece when the old immigrants departed was very different from the country the new immigrants left behind. Starting at the beginning of the 20th century, the country had grown and experienced two world wars, a civil war, monarchy rule and a military junta. Naturally with the passage of time the social atmosphere of the country had changed. The differences between the two groups led to some strain in the community that has not entirely disappeared today.

The clash between tradition and modernity also proved an issue. A dispute arose in 1970 over the use of Greek in the church. That year the Clergy Laity Congress of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America approved the substitution of English for Greek in the Divine

Liturgy. This also affected weddings between Greeks and non-Greeks. The archdiocese decided it would be acceptable to read the Gospel and the Apostles in English only if a Greek was marrying a non-Orthodox. Perhaps this ties into Miller's "Open Letter to Every Greek Orthodox in the Americas" message in the commemorative issue of the church community's 1970 journal. He stated: "...Lately there have been suggestions for change! There are forces at work trying to change the very basics of Greek-Orthodox faith... Many feel bitter and disappointed and want to leave our church." In English he wrote: "As of late certain recommendations have been made for certain changes in our liturgical structure. Contemplating these recommendations forced certain people to alienate themselves from the church, these, I find ill-advised... If you feel a problem does exist, then let us face it together, united, and united we shall correct it forever and ever." Still president of the community, Miller pleaded for unity in the community while recognizing the forces working against cohesion.

The 1970s was a decade of productivity. The year of 1974 was a particularly eventful one. An extra building near Saint Catherine was purchased, giving the community even more space for growth; an annex at St. Demetrios Elementary School of more than 300 students was established; St. Demetrios Church underwent a complete renovation; and air conditioning was installed at Saint Catherines all serving as highlights that year.

If one takes out a page out of St. Demetrios history, it is clear that they are a people made for perpetual progress. The community soon looked to this new project creating a high school. Ninth- through twelfth-grade classes were added as students progressed through the school. Still there was a need for official formalities and structure. A School Expansion Committee was formed and charged with negotiating with architectural firms, securing funding and developing construction plans. The price tag was expected to be \$500,000. The endeavor induced

Archbishop Iakovos to donate \$25,000, and the PTA, The Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society and grantor Tina Sintorineou added another \$10,000 to the funds.

In 1974 the battle began, the school's students were organized and shuffled around with the kindergarten and primary grades relocating to Saint Catherine. From then on the St. Demetrios building would house only middle- and high-school students. The buzz concerned not only the school board but also the entire Greek community. The largest Greek-American newspaper, The National Herald, hosted discussion among Greeks, and their panel occasionally published letters from curious readers concerning the high school. On Oct. 11, 1977, a member of the school board in Corona articulated the issues of the community: "...The prevailing problem seems to be money, from my understanding... The first part (of the problem) is fundraising for furnishing and keeping up with wages... The second part and even more difficult is the straining the parents of students with paying four more years of tuition about \$800 a year... Parents will be pressured to just put their kids in public schools, which is free. My advice to them is to lower tuition by \$150 or \$200 dollars..." A few months later, another community member responded to the published letter and noted: "How ironic that (in reading the Greek newspaper) I didn't even know that the first Greek-American high school is already in action in Astoria!" He went on to encourage the community to not stop there but to set its sights on establishing a Greek college, a Greek library and seminars for the sole purpose of progress. The building of a high school was a source of inspiration and enthusiasm for all.

The National Herald continued to play a role in helping out Saint Demetrios and not only through publishing the goings-on of the community. As late as 1982, Nick A. Andriotis, who served as president of the parish community from 1976 to 1977 and 1979 to 1982, thanked the newspaper for its economic contributions. He acknowledged that the staffers of the church

journal had given the school weekly financial advice and even donated \$4,000 to help with furnishings.

The inaugural ninth-grade class kicked off in 1975. A year later the community saw the highest enrollment in St. Demetrios history with 905 students, including a new ninth- and tenth-grade. The tenth grade had a rich curriculum: English, world history, biology, math, Greek, religion, physical education and health served as the skeleton structure for student schedules. Students also had the choice of art, music, French or Spanish for electives. The school also built a new laboratory in 1975, paving the way for more enriching high-school science lessons. Student activities included newspaper, yearbook, choir, student senate, volleyball, track, basketball, cheerleading, dance, and a variety of academic clubs, science, English and Greek groups.

The first high school class graduated in 1979. The church journal commemorating the year is embellished with an architect's drawing of the high school, which was still under construction. The school was recognized and congratulated by Iakovos but also His All Holiness Demetrios, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, and Menelaos Alexandrakis, the ambassador of Greece.

The day school's enrollment boomed by 1979. In 1973 the school hosted 608 students; by 1979 the number had more than doubled, reaching 1,270. On Jan. 27, 1980, the community celebrated the groundbreaking ceremonies. The building was completed before schedule (September 1982) but had its conclusive "cutting of the ribbon" May 9, 1982. About 1,500 students attended St. Demetrios 300 being in ninth through twelfth grade