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Letter
April 5, 2017

Reference: 2017 FDF

2017 FDF has come and gone. Has much changed in its 41-year history? Well, the answer is both yes and no.

Let me start by saying that it warms my heart to know that FDF remains alive and well. After spending the first 35 years at its helm and the last six as a proud observer, I still get emotional watching the dancers and their accomplishments – that will never change. To see the reactions of the parents, grandparents and friends as they observe with great pride and amazement this miracle unfolding before their eyes is thrilling. The dancers at every age, from four years to 50 and older, dance with such enthusiasm and excitement. From my perspective the quality of the performances has significantly improved over the years.

Watching my granddaughters, Litsa, Ellie, Penny and their teammates dance gave me a special thrill. Knowing the effort and hours of hard work they have devoted to the program made me proud. I recall the years when my three sons Thanasi, Nick, and Spiro danced at FDF, as did my niece Trish Demopoulos, and her husband Tony Demopoulos. Now the children and grandchildren of those that danced at FDF some 41 years ago are carrying on the tradition today. And their parents and grandparents are watching their progeny, dancing and directing in the same program. What an amazing legacy!

Equally important, we now have children of those early dancers serving on the FDF board of directors, and doing a spectacular job. Charlie Kyriacou, my dear friend and partner during my FDF years, has two adult children dancing and directing and his wife, Marie, is now judging. The tradition goes on.

Stunning Senior Performances

This year, in the Advanced Senior category, each team performed at a world-class level, with not a weak performance in the group. The amount of research and training that each of the Advanced Senior teams put into creating their respective performances was absolutely impressive, in fact, off the charts.

The teams from Las Vegas, Nevada and Novato in Marin County, California truly moved me, for different reasons. Las Vegas performed an incredible Pontian suite, including the ancient Greek ritual dance, Momogeri, which has seldom been seen in all of FDF's 41-year history. Their execution, style, costuming, and staging were magnificent.

The Minoan Dancers from Marin County have a long history going back to the early FDF when Effie Fourakis performed under the direction of Alkmini Kouri Bloom. This year's Cretan suite was one of the finest I have seen the group perform, and watching Effie and Vasili's precious daughter, Electra, dance with the group was an inspiration. It represented one of God's great gifts and a miracle to see her dancing.

No matter what dance group you want to talk about, there is a human-interest story in each one. I know this for I lived in spirit and thought with all of them for 35 years. I guarantee if you look for it, you will find a heartwarming and uplifting story in each group that will bring tears to your eyes.

Room for Improvement

What has changed about FDF over the years? If you listen to the comments of the attendees, the quality of the food and the accommodations were not up to par. The issues about this year's venue have already been addressed. Still, in my opinion, the so-called Grand Banquet was far from grand, and a fraction of what it used to be.

In particular, there were way too many speeches! Certainly, we need to recognize the people who contribute to the church and the program itself. But the speeches were too many and too long, and they detracted from the energy of the event.

Might there be a better way? For example, while we had a lovely video message from His All Holiness Bartholomew, the noise level was so high it was difficult to appreciate his message. Here's a suggestion: Play a message like this between rounds of the dance competition. Many groups need 15 to 20 minutes to get set up. What a great time to share such a message. It would catch a lot more people's attention, fill the wait time between groups, and there would be no competition with other presentations and speakers.

Judging is another area that has caused concern over the years. I am glad to see some new judges – that is healthy. The judging process has also become quite sophisticated in terms of the use of technology. However, scoring is not a science and judges have their own biases. Over the years while I was at FDF, we would monitor and examine the scoring of the judges in order to better understand their biases.

The best way to minimize biases in judging is to reach out to qualified people in Greece, Canada and Europe to participate as judges. I recognize the need to find new recruits, transport them, and house a sufficient number can be expensive. However, with technology it would not be impossible to invite qualified people from Greece, and elsewhere, to cast their votes remotely in real time. With FDF live streaming the performances, the biggest challenge might come from the time-zone differences.

FDF must remain true to our traditions of fairness, balance and commitment to removing as much of the perception of bias as possible, so I am always glad to see some new judges. When one community, over a ten-year period or longer, such as in the Advanced Senior level, keeps winning first or sweepstakes, one might question the scoring process.

Thanks to All

I am pleased to note that the inspiration of Metropolitan Anthony still comes across strongly at FDF. I continue to refer to Metropolitan Anthony as my dearest friend, and the St. Paul of FDF. Without his speaking about it everywhere he went, I am certain it would not have grown to its current magnificence.

In the fourth year of FDF, which was the first year that then-Bishop Anthony attended, he did so with an open mind and heart, and yet with some apprehension. During the weekend, as he was taking in the event, sensing the emotions of the attendees, and experiencing the fellowship of the dancers, an "epiphany" came upon him.

During those years, rather than dozens of workshops, we made an effort to bring in a unique and highly inspirational speaker to talk to the dancers and parents: one who could make Christ real and His teachings instructive. That year we had invited Billy Graham, the famous evangelist, to speak, and he had given us a tentative acceptance. Unfortunately, he had to cancel at the last minute, and

sent in his place the head of his Campus Crusade for Christ Ministries, a young man and member of the Universal Clergy.

The young man was an exceptional speaker who kept us all on the edge of our seats. At the conclusion of his presentation, he approached Bishop Anthony to thank him for the opportunity and privilege to speak to his flock, saying, "I hope you Greek Orthodox truly appreciate what you have here for I would give my right arm for such a mouse trap." Now perhaps "mouse trap" isn't the way you or I would describe the attraction of FDF, but from that day forward no one could say anything negative about FDF to the Metropolitan.

I will close by asking God to bless the parents, the directors and dancers for this great gift we have been given year in and year out. Thank you to the Orthodox Church and its clergy that have embraced this ministry. You have recognized its significant value and contribution. And God bless those dedicated members of the management team that work so hard each year to make this event go off smoothly.

Lastly, I would like to invite the directors and dancers to step up and share their stories. One place to do so is on our website, A Web of Culture. Express your opinions about what it means to be in a Greek dance group and why FDF is so important to you. When expressing your thoughts, please remember: Is it kind? Is it truthful? Is it necessary? If you use those three phrases as your guide, your thoughts and comments will truly resonate with feeling and power.

I remain your champion in dance and the Dance Ministry.

Yours in Christ,

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