

Dance for peace- A dance step towards peace in the island Cyprus

Dance has always been an integral part of my life. I started dancing at the age of six and I am still passionate about this art. The first dance I have ever learned was a Cypriot folkloric dance. It has been eighteen years and my passion for my country's traditional dances grows strongly every day. I have been a member and a leader of the selective dance group of the Dance Club of the University of Cyprus for four years and I had the opportunity to represent my country in international dance festivals all over Europe. Currently, I am the Dance Activities Fellow of International House, New York, and this has given me the opportunity to cultivate a global interest of sharing culture through dance. To me sharing your culture on stage through dance has always been fascinating. I believe that dance can achieve so much, and I dare to imagine bringing together the youth of Cyprus through this performing art.

Unfortunately the small nation of Cyprus carries a very sad story. The island has been divided since 1974 and the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot population have lived apart in the Southern and Northern part of the island respectively. Before 1974 these populations used to live in relative peace and harmony. Growing up being taught to feel animosity towards another group, because of the strong influence of media and biased education, the very fact that the country's population used to live together in peace seemed impossible for me.

In 2003, the borders between the two parts of the country were opened and people from both sides were allowed access to most of the parts of the island. Since then, the idea of unification of the island has been a huge topic of discussion and reconciliation of the population; especially the youth has been taking place. This is when everything came to be revised; new curricula for education has been designed and ready to be implemented, the issue of unification is no longer a taboo for media and more importantly organized youth associations from both sides have been approaching each other. There is still great effort needed for the two populations to peacefully coexist. My idea for my project of peace is part of this effort.

Students from the Dance Club of the University of Cyprus and the Dance Club of the Eastern Mediterranean University will get together to prepare a three-day performance of traditional Cypriot dances. Both populations share similar dances, therefore dances to be taught will be familiar to both groups. Students will rehearse together for a month. Rehearsals will take place three times a week and between the rehearsals two conflict resolution workshops will be scheduled. The ultimate goal is for students to rehearse in both universities' facilities. Therefore, encouraging a bilateral exchange.

*“The Dance Club of University of Cyprus, founded in 1992, today celebrates 16 years of life and cultural contribution. Throughout all these years, the Dance Club managed to have a successful and glamorous evolution and reach an almost professional level of dancing and performing in general. It is living proof that students cannot only succeed in academy but also delve into the world of art, culture, tradition, creativity and imagination. The Dance Club was founded in 1992 along with the foundation of the University of Cyprus. Since then, it is constantly growing and developing because of the students' love and support. The main aim for the formation of this selected dance group has been not only to represent the University and Cyprus abroad but also to preserve and promote the Cypriot tradition and culture. Being a carrier of civilization, the UCY Dance Team respects the Cypriot tradition and after serious research uses dance to represent as accurately as possible the way various customs were held in the Cypriot past (weddings, flirting, agricultural work etc)”*

Having conflict resolution workshops and rehearsing together would be a great challenge but simultaneously a rewarding experience for the students/dancers involved as this would probably be the first time that a safe space for open discussion is provided. It is beyond any doubt, that students from both sides share inquiries and curiosity about each other. The outcome of this project would be laying the foundation for understanding, compassion and eventually an ideal peaceful reconciliation through dance.

I have always been redefining the term peace in my mind, as it is so much a part of what I hope my country will achieve. Peace in this project is defined as the opportunity of providing a safe space through the art of dance for open discussion, breaking down stereotypes, eliminating ignorance and providing sound and unbiased educational grounding. The result of the project is twofold; firstly to create this safe space and secondly to dance together not as Greek-Cypriots or Turkish-Cypriots but as Cypriots. This project is different because it dares to approach a real and relatively recent conflict, and challenge the minds of youth in Cyprus. As a young and inspired educator and having a great love of dance, I believe that I have the ability to confidently communicate with young people and inspire them as well to fulfill the ultimate goal of peace.

The sustainability of this project is that some rehearsals and final performance will be filmed and that future generations will have a digital inventory of traditional Cypriot dances. Eventually, this digital archive will be evidence for future generations of the steps taken towards peace in Cyprus.