

The National Herald

N.Y. Greek American Women Declare: AGAPW

By Constantine S. Sirigos
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NEW YORK – AGAPW is the Greek word that means “I love”. It is also the acronym for a new organization, the Association of Greek American Professional Women. On Thursday, July 15, Professional women of Hellenic background felt the love in a room filled with women of all ages and backgrounds. They were inspired by what they have heard through word of mouth about this new endeavor of a handful of dedicated Hellenes in New York to create a network for Greek women.

The second storey midtown Manhattan loft was lit by the setting sun and was filled interesting and friendly people enjoying delicious hors d’oeuvres and wine donated by the new group’s supporters and benefactors.

Olga Alexakos, who organized some preliminary informal social and literary events where the group’s concepts and goals were also discussed, welcomed the guests. She told The National Herald that, “One of most rewarding experiences I have had in the Greek community is the compassion, generosity, sensibility and caring among Greek American women, and their love for the community and anything Greek.” Speaking of the work AGAPW’s mission will entail, she said “it is so rewarding and to reach out to women, especially the ones who have immigrated here and who crave community, and to be part of something beautiful.”



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(R-L) AGAPW President Olga Alexakos, benefactor Virginia Davies, Cyprus Consul General in NY Koula Sophianou, AGAPW VP Effie Lekas.

Among the guests were Greek men showing their support for a good cause. Koula Sophianou, Consul General of Cyprus in New York also greeted the guest and expressed her appreciation and hopes for the new group. Political Strategist Eleni Dalimpaltadaki, who hosted the event in her home, introduced photographer and writer Maria Garozi, whose exhibit of photos titled “Would it be America if not for...? The American Superwoman and Immigrants on the Streets of New York” graced the space and stimulated conversations during the cocktail reception. Garozi explained the connection between her pictures and AGAPW: “When I go out its all about the word and the feeling “Agapo” – that’s what New York is all about.”

Reflecting the group’s multifaceted membership and functions, the artistic portion of the program yielded to the business energy New York, whose financial firms include so many dynamic Greek women. Dr. Vasilis Katsikiotis, Managing Director with Merrill Lynch-Bank of America an expert in credit default swaps and other complex elements of the Greek financial crisis. His informative presentation was succeeded by a lively and challenging discussion that examined Greece’s situation from many perspectives. Katsikiotis is optimistic about Greece because “when two talented Greeks meet there is always potential for a miracle.” He also touched on the seemingly sputtering American recovery, noting that corporations are not investing or hiring. He also warned against putting too much hope in the recently passed financial industry reform legislation. “Regulations do not avert crisis. Crises end only when confidence is restored.”



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Artwork, conversation, and networking were order of the evening at the AGAPW gathering in midtown Manhattan.

TNH learned that Greek women in New York have long yearned for such an organization. Some seeds were planted at a 1990 conference held at Queens College on women and ethnicity which brought together women from Greek, Italian, Jewish, Irish and Latin backgrounds and was attended by prominent Greek American women such as the late sociologist Alice Scourby, Marina Angel, law professor at Temple University, and Minerva Stergianopoulos. At one point they realized they were the only ethnic group that did not have a networking organization. The conversation led to the establishment of

the Greek American Woman's Network, GAWN, a national organization which engendered many important social and mentoring relationships. But many women felt something more was needed, especially with a local focus.

While the organization is being built, the founders are proceeding with events such as last Thursday's to announce the group and immediately commence with its function of bringing together talented Greek American women. Its bylaws call for a board of three to seven members, so its founding board has begun with three members: President Olga Alexakos, VP and Associate Broker at the real estate firm Core New York - Effie Lekas, Vice President and Community Liaison who is Asst. Director of Queens College's Center for Byzantine and Modern Greek studies, and Vice President and Treasurer Sophia Catsambis, Prof. of sociology at Queens College.

Alexakos said the founding board's function is to facilitate the growth of its membership while keeping it's structure simple. She told The National Herald, "eventually we want more to be involved in general and on the board - the by laws require three to seven members." Effie Lekas marveled at how the three have complemented each other exactly to give the group such a good start. Alexakos added, "We have differences, we come from different backgrounds with different ideas of leadership," so "all decisions now are by unanimous vote, but that will change as board is filled. The idea is to work together, which means compromise."

The group will have a grass roots emphasis, with numerous free events open to everyone. Alexakos said, "We will continue to have events at people's homes. We want to bring everyone together." Preparations for the group benefited from the generosity of people like Virginia Davies, an Armenian American with many Greek friends, who has hosted meetings and events at her apartment.

Alexakos brings a deep and varied experience to her leadership position. Before she earned a doctorate in economics, studying the political economy of women and prior to her work in real estate, Alexakos studied psychology and was a social worker.

Through her real estate career she brings experienced working with teams and mediating, noting "In real estate you really develop the art of working with teams." But she also has a passion for the arts which motivates her to develop what she believes is AGAPW's vital cultural dimension. She said that, "Living in New York for 36 years, art is an important part of my life. My art is also connected to my being Greek. There are many writers in my family, and I think Greeks are born poets and philosophers."

Effie Lekas is very excited about AGAPW. She emphasized the needs of Greek and Cypriot American women in the New York area and how her devoted team and its knowledge and experience can help. Speaking about the birth of AGAPW, told TNH "the central tenet of marketing is find a need and fill it." She is especially concerned with the needs of women still in college or who have just earned their degrees. "These young women need guidance and mentoring," and she regretted that there has been no

“organized leadership of successful women despite the fact that there are so many successful Greek women in so many fields.”

Sophia Catsambis is sociologist specializing in the sociology of education. She was drawn to AGAPW because she felt, like many Greek American women in New York and the U.S., that they are isolated from each other and that as Greek American professional and working women they have few opportunities for exchanging ideas and connecting, and AGAPW fills that void. She stressed that the organization will have a strong educational dimension. AGAPW will offer workshops and lectures, and will bring in talented women working in NYC to share their skills, ideas and knowledge regarding the world of work. “When we strengthen ourselves at work, we strengthen our families too. Since most wives have to work, finding a balance between home and work is necessary,” and so is helping women advance in their careers. She said AGAPW will help women address these and other thorny issues that impact families, which she believes will strengthen the Greek American community.

AGAPW’s website, www.agapw.org says the mission of AGAPW is to provide a forum for Greek American women to share with each other their unique talents and skills and expand their opportunities for professional development and leadership. To this effect AGAPW will initiate activities and be a resource center in the areas of: Leadership, Education, Professional Planning, Finance. By providing a forum for Greek American women to meet each other, celebrate accomplishments, entertain and enlighten through activities such as, lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences, art shows, performances, they will become a center for Contact and Communication. AGAPW can be contacted by phone at 917-405-6833.

The Greek hors d’oeuvres were provided by Christos Valtzoglou of Pylos and the wine through the generosity of Konstantine Drougos of Wonderful Ethnic. You can learn more about the work of Maria Garozi at <http://www.myself.gr/Blog/muses-Blogs-muses/130-7544.html> and on her blog, <http://FindingEidothea.blogspot.com>.