

An Interview with Holy Cross Church Protopsalti Antonios Kehagias

By Eleni Sakellis

ASTORIA – Greek Orthodox chanting is an art forged over the millennia of church history. The tradition continues today with talented chanter and Byzantine music teacher Antonios Kehagias. He spoke with The National Herald about chanting and the importance of keeping up the tradition that is so unique to the Greek Orthodox Christian faith.

From age seven, Kehagias was an altar boy and soon became interested in the chanting that filled the church with heavenly music. By fifteen, Kehagias was on his way to becoming a chanter, taking formal instruction in Byzantine Music from Archon Protopsaltis of the Archdiocese of North and South America, Nicholas Stelarios.

While taking lessons with Stelarios, Kehagias attended St. Demetrios and St. Catherine Parochial Greek Orthodox Church School in Astoria and participated in a Byzantine music choir supervised by Gerasimos Vasilopoulos as well as Kehagias' older brother,

Demetrios who is the choir director of the Archdiocese Byzantine Choir. Kehagias also participated in various concerts that were organized at the Hellenic Cultural Center of the Archdiocese Atlanta, the Archdiocese Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Manhattan, and various churches throughout the New York Tri-State area.

At 23, he passed examinations and obtained the Certificate of Byzantine Music (pixio) with the grade of arista (perfect) from the National Conservatory of Athens. That same year, Kehagias was appointed first chanter at Saints Constantine and Helen Church in Jackson Heights.

In 2009, he passed examinations and obtained the Diploma in Byzantine Music from the National Conservatory of Athens, with the grade distinction of arista (perfect) as well. He was then hired as the Protopsalti (first chanter) of St. Catherine and St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Astoria. Most recently, he was appointed Protopsalti at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church of Whitestone.



Antonios Kehagias, Protopsalti at Holy Cross Church and teacher at the Archdiocesan School of Byzantine Music in NY.

Kehagias told TNH about learning to chant, noting that there is more to it than just learning to read the music. Listening to the best chanters was another way the student-chanters develop the little de-

tails, how the chanter did that with his voice." Kehagias explained, "You paint a picture with your voice." Variations in tone, loud, soft, feeling, happy, sad, serious, allow the chanters to express in music what the Gospels express in words. The tone and feeling must match the words as well, Kehagias noted. He mentioned especially, the readings from the Letters of St. Paul reading them carefully to make sure his chanting matches what the Apostle's words. A good chanter helps to bring people to church and fell more connected to God. "When you hear nice music, it creates feelings in you and that's especially important when you want to pray."

Kehagias recalled a turning point in his life at age 15 when he thought about giving up chanting. His father urged him to continue chanting and now, he is thankful for his father's encouragement that has shaped his life. He hopes young people will follow the example and keep up with an activity since it might lead to their life's work. Kehagias mentioned that his father is from Sparta and his

mother from Andros. As one of the three teachers at the Archdiocesan School of Byzantine Music, he is impressed with the enthusiasm of his students, including more and more young people and especially those from diverse backgrounds who did not grow up in the Greek Orthodox Church. Kehagias noted that many students are Greek or of Greek descent, but there are also Italians and even an Iraqi student. An airline pilot, a police officer, and a retired detective are also among the students learning to chant.

When asked if he views his role as Protopsalti as a stepping stone to the priesthood, Kehagias said he might consider becoming a priest in the future, but not right now. It is clear that he enjoys his work. Kehagias' talent as a chanter and as a teacher with a profound respect and love for the tradition of Byzantine music does well for the future of chanting in the church.

More information on the Archdiocesan School of Byzantine Music is available online at ashm.goarch.org

AGAPW and Hellenic Medical Society Host Informative Cancer Talk

By Eleni Sakellis

NEW YORK – Cancer is not often an easy topic of conversation for most people, but it should be. Avoiding the word, like many Greeks have done in the past and some continue to do today, doesn't make the disease or its impact on people's health go away.

The informative discussion presented by the Association of Greek American Professional Women (AGAPW) and the Hellenic Medical Society of New York (HMSNY) was held on November 3 at the Wells Fargo Corporate Building Conference Center in midtown Manhattan. The symposium focused on the current state of cancer prevention and treatment in America and was attended by members of AGAPW, professionals from various backgrounds, including many doctors from HMSNY, and the distinguished panelists.

The event was dedicated to the memory of Liz Tsaoussis, who passed away on September 12 after her four-year battle with ovarian cancer as AGAPW founder and President Olga Alexakos said in her opening re-



Dr. Karen Burke, Dr. George Liakess, Dr. Alice Zervoudakis, Dr. Penny Andreopoulos, Irene Sarri, Dr. Stella Lymberis, Dr. George Tsioulas, Dr. Evi Giannakakou, Dr. Olga Alexakos, Gus Lambropoulos, Dr. Pannie Triffilis, Dr. Aphrodite Navab.

discussion of the disease. For years, Greeks would simply not say the word cancer, though the word itself is of Greek origin, or would refer to it with euphemisms. Even today, there are Greeks and people of Greek descent who continue the practice, but not speaking about cancer and not even saying the word does nothing to raise awareness about prevention, treatment, and the advances that have increased survival rates dramatically in recent years.

Dr. Tsioulas spoke about the advances in breast cancer treatment, noting that 1 out of 7 women will be diagnosed. Through the advancements in early detection, especially mammography, early breast cancer is treatable and curable. He pointed out that mammography is almost 50 years old, and the latest 4th generation machines are digital and pick up lesions at earlier stages and the radiation associated with mammography is miniscule compared to even a few years ago. About 50% of women get screened, Tsioulas observed, imagine what a success it would be if that number was 90%. Women over age 50 should be screened every year or every other year if they have no family history of breast or ovarian cancer. Those with a

family history should be screened ten years earlier than the youngest diagnosis in the family. Self-examinations are also vital for the early detection of breast cancer.

Surgical oncologist Ioannis Hatzaras pointed out that cancer surgery is a hundred years old and advancements in treatment have made surgery much less invasive so patients are able to recover faster and can proceed with other treatments administered by a medical oncologist. Dr. Hatzaras noted that the right diagnosis is important since cancer is not one disease, but many different diseases. The treatment can then be tailored to the patient and their specific type of cancer. He also emphasized that cancer is a complex illness that requires a team of doctors, a team of oncologists, working together to tailor the treatment plan.

As a medical oncologist at Memorial Sloan Kettering, Dr. Zervoudakis treats patients with early stage and advanced stages of cancer, noting that doctors must be sensitive about the way they inform patients of a cancer diagnosis. She noted that different types of chemotherapy are available to help patients live longer and maintain their quality of life. Clinical trials are also



Dr. Karen Burke and AGAPW founder and president Olga Alexakos.

marks. Alexakos introduced Tsaoussis' children Evangelia Moran and George Tsaoussis Carter who honored his mother's memory with moving words about her inspiring strength and spirit during her cancer battle. Given three months to live, Tsaoussis fought and lived for four years, continuing to work at the Children's Museum of Manhattan and help others in spite of her diagnosis and falling health. As Alexakos noted about her dear friend Liz, she lives on in her children and in the wonderful memories they shared.

Radiation oncologist Dr. Stella Lymberis moderated the discussion and participated along with panelists Dr. George Tsioulas, surgical oncologist; Dr. Evi Giannakakou, research scientist; Dr. Karen Burke Goulardes, dermatologist and research scientist; Dr. Ioannis Hatzaras, surgical oncologist; and Dr. Alice Zervoudakis, medical oncologist.

The topic of cancer has gained more attention recently in his final State of the Union address, President Obama tasked Vice President Joe Biden with leading a new national effort, a cancer moonshot. The ultimate goal of Biden's Moonshot initiative is to achieve a decade's worth of advances in cancer prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, in just five years. The effort will hopefully increase the number of new breakthroughs in treatment through intensified research on immunotherapy, more clinical trials, and increased sharing of data to improve access to care and reduce disparities in care for all patients. Dr. Lymberis pointed out how Greek culture affects the

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Cocktails 5:30 p.m. Dinner & Dancing 6:30 p.m.

We look forward to your participation and support which will benefit the Ministries and the restoration of our church.

For reservations please call the church office at 212-795-5870 or send an e-mail office@SaintSpyridon.net