

HOW THE AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE (AFS) CHANGED MY LIFE AND ACCOMPLISH THE AMERICAN DREAM

In early February 1954 I was a senior at the Drama High School in Greece. After a boring Latin class I bumped into my English teacher who told me that he had heard about a scholarship that existed to go to America and that more details could be found in the US Information Service (USIS) in Kavala (36 km south of Drama). During my next class (ancient Greek) I started thinking and decided to take the 2pm bus to Kavala (luck). I arrived a few minutes before 3pm and I saw the USIS hall filled with about 70 students my age (17). The secretary asked me if I came to take the AFS essay and I said YES, YES. I wrote an essay that "I wanted to go to the land of the free and the home of the brave, where people live on the ground, travel under the ground, worked in the sky etc etc". They informed me that they would select 2 students from Northern Greece. to send my grades and letters of recommendation and that the decision would be announced precisely at 3pm after 3 weeks. If the winner was not there at 3pm they would choose an alternate. No information was given about the scholarship details at that time.

I waited anxiously for the magic day and for some reason (luck) I decided to take the 11am bus which should take me to Kavala in an hour. Unfortunately, there is a mountain on the way and as we started climbing a heavy snowstorm started. My bus slid off the road, flipped and was caught by 2 pine trees (luck) rather than plunging at least 1000 meters down the mountain. I had a gash on my forehead that bled, but I got out of the bus (nobody was seriously injured) and started climbing the mountain freezing to death and covered in blood. I managed to arrive at the USIS at precisely 3:00pm, I heard the secretary say "Congratulations Mr. Athanassiades, you are going to America" and fainted. They took care of me, but they did not know, as yet, my destination in the US or any other details.

Eventually I went to Athens where I met the rest of the selected 42 AFS Greeks, sailed to Naples, picked up the Italians in Rome and Milan and ended up in Paris with the 443 European AFSers (a ratio of two girls to one boy!!!) and from LeHavre sailed on a small chartered boat, the SEVEN SEAS, accompanied by 4 chaperons in their early 20's. It took 8 glorious days to arrive in New York. Obviously with 443 17 year old kids, the southern Europeans made immediate contact with the northern Europeans (and vice-versa) and a good time. a lot of fun and loving blessed our travel.

In New York I finally learned that I would live in Mill Valley, Calif. a fantastic town full of redwood trees, with the family of Dr. and Mrs Fowler and my American brother and sister. And that I would repeat my senior year at Tamalpais High School (it was a glorious --for me- last minute substitution from my original place in Kansas at the home of a Baptist minister that had a heart attack -- luck). It only took me about 2 months to appreciate the kindness and spirit of the American people who did not care about the status of my family (poor) but only your abilities and your willingness for hard work. I then decided that I would stay in America forever. My professors at Tamalpais High were so very helpful about my university selection. I applied to 15 science/engineering schools including MIT, Caltech, Stanford etc and only Harvard did not accept me. I ended up selecting the University of California at Berkeley, because their scholarship offer matched the out-of-state tuition (\$300/yr) and my father could not afford to send me more than \$50/month. After a semester I became an au-pair boy for a wonderful family in Oakland until I receive my BSEE in 1958. Then I had a stipend and free tuition as a teaching assistant until my PhD in June 1961.

I was lucky, once more, when I returned to Greece because I could exchange my J2 visa for an F student visa, 2 weeks before the passing of the law requiring J2 visa holders to stay in the country of

origin for 2 years before returning to the US. So I arrived at Berkeley two days before registration day in September 1955.

I then started my journey to accomplish the American dream. At Berkeley I received my BSEE, MSEE and PhD in 6 years (a record) and in 1961 I joined the research staff of the MIT Lincoln Lab and 2 years later the Electrical Engineering faculty at MIT. I loved both teaching and research, but especially supervising and guiding the research of my graduate students. I supervised 48 doctoral students, over 100 SM students, co-authored 3 textbooks, over 350 journal articles, received almost every award in my field (control theory) and 3 honorary PhDs. I also recorded 70 hours of lectures on TV tape in my field which MIT sold or rented to dozens of companies so that thousands of practicing engineers learned the rapid advances in control systems. With one of my doctoral students, I co-founded a defense consulting firm, ALPHATECH, that grew from 3 staff to over 300 before we sold it.

Thank you AFS for helping a poor-country-Greek-boy accomplish the American dream in this, my chosen, great country, the United States of America!

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