

# Fighting the cycle of poverty and illiteracy

By ANGELIKA TIMMS  
SPECIAL TO THE ATHENS NEWS

SOCIAL worker Myrto Lemos is a firm believer in the adage that "charity begins at home." A former actress, who always felt drawn to the plight of the underprivileged, she now channels all her energies into her Support Centre for Children and Family, located in the heart of two run-down inner city districts, Metaxourgeio and Kolonos.

The centre's main focus is on the children of these downgraded neighbourhoods, usually Muslims or Gypsies from Western Thrace or Albania. These kids have worked on the streets since they could walk, washing windshields at traffic lights, selling flowers and tissues, or sometimes just begging. Trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty and illiteracy, they not only miss the joys of carefree childhood, they lack the education and skills to ensure a better future for themselves or their own offspring.

"The parents used to work on farms," explains Myrto, "but now low-paid foreigners have taken their jobs and they've been forced to move to the cities. Because they're illiterate and have no skills, there's no work for them here, and the state doesn't help."

"To support the family, they send their children to work in the streets. And this problem continues, because the children often have kids of their own when they're only 14-15, so they become like their parents, perhaps even worse. With ever-increasing numbers, the phenomenon of socially-excluded children is like a time-bomb, which - if and when it explodes - will have very serious consequences for our society."

At the roomy, three-storey centre - open from 11am to 6pm - approximately 200 kids aged from 5 to 15 are welcomed by the volunteer staff, who endeavour to boost their confidence and self-esteem. They are divided into groups - according to age and knowledge - and encouraged to learn to read and write, do simple arithmetic, and express themselves creatively through painting, drawing, theatre and computer games.

"The regular school programme is very hard for them," says Myrto, "because their parents can't help them and they can't keep up with the lessons. The parents don't understand how important it is for their kids to go to school, because they never did themselves. And the law on compulsory education is not enforced by the Greek state as it should be."

"The children like it here, because we encourage them, without pushing, and try to give each one as much individual attention as possible. They're very bright and can learn quickly, with the right approach. In fact, some of them are very special and have great talents; it's such a shame that they can't develop these further."

Myrto is proud of each child's work, which is meticulously collected and kept in individual folders, to keep a record of their progress. There are also hundreds of photographs, arranged neatly in albums, taken at parties, theatre outings and beach excursions organised by the centre.

To raise awareness about personal hygiene and help the children feel better about their self-image, the centre provides a bathroom where they can shower and change into clean clothes - either donated, or washed on the premises. In addition, they enjoy a well-balanced meal -



Chios-born Myrto Lemos (C) has travelled extensively as a child. She now runs the Support Centre for Children and Family, located in two inner-city areas: Metaxourgeio and Kolonos.

with fish, cheese, milk, fruit and vegetables - to supplement the watery potato soup that is usually their staple diet at home.

Born in Chios in 1941 of actors who were travelling players, Myrto feels a special affinity for the Gypsy children. "When I was only 40 days old," she says, "we had to flee to Cyprus, Turkey and Egypt for four years, because of the war."

"My parents had a repertory theatre and often travelled around Greece, as well as to the United States, Canada and Egypt. I was always changing schools and I slept backstage a lot, so I have a lot in common with these kids, except that

I had an education."

Being dyslexic and attending a total of 18 different schools made learning rather tough for her, but she remembers being a happy child and - like her parents - very optimistic. She enjoyed acting with her mother and father on stage, but disliked the rivalry she sensed the actors felt towards one another. Although she was encouraged and urged to develop her acting talent, she never actively embraced the stage as a future profession, preferring to search for her own way in life.

In 1956, her parents went to the United States to organise a theatre for the Greek community in New

York, and she followed two years later. There, she continued acting in her father's theatre, while completing high school and going on to college. "I was interested in teaching nursery school," she recalls, "but then decided to study social work."

In the meantime, Myrto married, leaving the theatre to take care of her two children, but continuing night courses in various subjects. Eventually, she became area supervisor for the Hellenic American Neighbourhood Action Committee.

Her work involved dealing with mainly Greek families and their many problems - housing, medical, educational, economic. "I enjoyed the work," she says, "I liked to solve problems and had a good rapport with the people."

During this time, she regularly visited Greece in the summer, until she decided to return permanently in 1988. Initially, she experienced great difficulties finding work and having her US diplomas recognised. However, three years later, she was appointed to organise a European Union-funded seminar on socially marginalised minorities for teachers and social workers, held in Metaxourgeio.

"It was my first contact with this area and the problems of the people living here," she says. "I did a lot of research, visiting offices, schools and homes. They live in terrible conditions - a whole family in one room, without water or electricity, and they sleep on the floor. In winter, their homes are heated with wood from crates found in the street."

Curious children began to visit the Metaxourgeio office, where they were given pencils and paints, and offered a temporary haven from their tough street existence. "I saw how many problems existed here," says Myrto, "how the children couldn't

learn at home and there were no state programmes for them. After the seminars finished, I was concerned about what would happen to them. I went to ministries and municipalities, but no-one was interested."

In 1997, she rented a small place in the area with her own funds and money collected from friends, adding desks and other necessities. The original premises in Metaxourgeio have been retained, to provide much-needed legal aid for the parents, most of whom have very complex family relationships.

With the assistance of the General Secretariat for Equality and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the centre also plans to offer literacy courses for mothers, plus advice on personal hygiene, family planning and possible job prospects.

The larger Kolonos centre was opened earlier this year and is desperately in need of funds for more regular specialised staff to assist the present personnel - eight permanent and about 30 volunteers. With any additional finance, Myrto would be very keen to establish job training programmes for the teenagers.

Meanwhile, in September, the Schedia Centre of Artistic and Educational Training will collaborate with the Support centre to assist in meeting the kids' needs.

"I believe something of this will have an impact on these children," she says passionately, "to become better parents themselves and give their own kids a better life. We have to work hard, but I'd like to see some of these children becoming somebody - that would be my reward."

Donations and other assistance for the Support Centre for Children and Family would be gratefully accepted. Tel 523-9402 (11am-6pm, closed in August).