

Greek Orthodox Education and the Saint Demetrios School of Astoria: 1956-2012

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*An Historical Study on the History of
the Saint Demetrios Greek-American School of Astoria*

Chapter I

Introduction

There are 8 Greek Orthodox parochial day schools currently functioning in the State of New York with an enrollment of approximately 1400 students. All Greek Orthodox parochial day schools adhere to local and state mandated curricula. The Greek-American schools operate under the auspices of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. They maintain nurseries, pre-school centers, kindergartens, elementary and middle schools grades. Only one parochial school maintains a high school. The schools offer a program of studies that include the teaching of Modern Greek language, Greek history, Greek culture, and most importantly Greek-Orthodox faith.

The Problem

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to, examine and outline the development of the history of the Saint Demetrios Greek American School of Astoria, the largest Greek Orthodox parochial school in the United States focusing on the growth and transformation of the school's philosophy and mission within the span of its fifty six years of operation. Second, examine how this culturally ethnic school has responded to the changing times.

Statement of the Problem

This is a historical study with three main objectives: to examine the development of the school from 1956-present, to study the development of the school in relation to the history of Greek-Orthodox Education, and to look at how this culturally ethnic school has responded to the changing times. This study is undertaken primarily by means of document analysis as well as interviews.

The study focuses on the history of the Saint Demetrios Greek American School of Astoria, Astoria, New York, focusing on the school's mission spanning its existence. The Saint Demetrios Greek American School of Astoria is the largest Greek Orthodox parochial school in the United States and also home to the only high school outside of Greece.

Significance of Study

The study is concerned with the development of the history of the Saint Demetrios Greek American School of Astoria, Astoria, New York, during the period of 1956-2012 with a special focus of the school's adaptation and response to the changing times. Through careful examination of document and archival sources, the philosophy which serves as the foundation for the inception and growth of this school may be more clearly understood by Greek-Americans as well as other ethnic cultures. The findings of this study may provide assistance to other cultural and or ethnic groups coping with similar problems in attempting to begin and or maintain their own schools.

Moreover, Greek Orthodox clergy, administrators and school boards, may use this study

as a model of what constitutes a successful Greek orthodox school as well as potential warning signs of areas in which improvement is needed.

This study will be the first in depth study of the largest Greek Orthodox school system in the United States which also is home of the only Greek-American High School outside of Greece.

Definition of Terms

Greek- A citizen of Greece or any other country with a historic Greek presence such as Asia Minor or Cyprus.

Greek-American- An American citizen or resident of Greek origin.

First Generation Greek-American- A Greek American immigrant.

Second Generation Greek-American- a child born in the United States but one or both parents are of Hellenic decent.

Parochial School- A school sponsored by a specific religious denomination and which incorporates religious and possibly second language instruction in its curriculum.

Greek-Community /Parish- Greek Americans who by virtue of membership or association to a Greek Orthodox Church also partake together in a host of other activities serving their common spiritual and social cultural needs.

Greek Parochial School- A parochial school which is sponsored by a Greek-Orthodox community and has a Greek language, religion and cultural component.

Limitations of Study

This study is limited to one Greek Orthodox parochial day school. This study does not examine the behavior of the students and teachers in this school. Additionally, this research does not assess needs articulated by students, faculty or parents. It relies on information provided chiefly by school documents, newspapers and interviews.

Organization of Study

Chapter I evaluates the sources that are pertinent to this study particularly those dealing with the community and school of Saint Demetrios Demetrios of Astoria. Chapter I also examines the research methods used by reviewing the qualitative research process of historical analysis. Additionally, this chapter investigates historical research based upon document analysis.

Chapter II examines the history of the Saint Demetrios Greek Orthodox Community of Astoria and the establishment of the largest Greek-American school in the United States.

Chapter III offers a history of the Greek Orthodox Church in the United States, including a history of Greek American day schools.

Chapter IV presents a summary of all the previous chapters. Moreover, there are certain recommendations made to other educators.

Methodology

Historical Analysis

Document Analysis

Interviewing

Chapter II

The History of the Hellenic Orthodox Community of Astoria Saint Demetrios

1923-2012

Years ago, a few Greeks linked by their religious and ethnic zeal, set forth a goal and began their arduous journey through the vast, consuming, and melting pot society for their new adopted land, to reach their dream. For years, spurred by hope, strengthened by accomplishments, they ascended difficult, future paths toward the realization of this goal.

The Community of Saint Demetrios has been in existence for nearly a century and its progress has been astonishing. So much has been achieved in so brief a time. Few communities can match its accomplishments and offer so much to its members.

The very first organized meeting of Greek Orthodox immigrants in New York City, took place on December 18, 1923 at the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Immediately following, these few Greek families received permission from the then, Archbishop Rodostolou to attend services in the Archdiocesan chapel of St. Athanasios. At that time, the first Greek School was also established.

The people then felt a need to organize their own church and in 1927 the ground on which Saint Demetrios stands today, was purchased. An architect was engaged a structure was agreed upon which could later serve as a basement for the someday completed church of their dream. (Antonopoulos p.38)

With only \$306.00 in their treasury, these immigrants consisting of furriers, tailors, bakers and laborers gathered together on November 7, 1927 to form a charter with the State of

New York and proclaimed the “Hellenic Orthodox Community of Astoria, St. Demetrios Inc.” as their official name. Twenty days later a cornerstone was laid at the present site of the Saint Demetrios Church and only six months later on April 1, 1928 the basement was consecrated as the first church building of the community with Metropolitan Germanos Polzoidis as its pastor.

From the inception of the community an afternoon Greek school and Sunday school program was organized to hold on to the precious Greek language, customs, traditions and religion. For nine years the parishioners worshipped in their small basement church. During holidays a tent was pitched on the grounds to accommodate the people. Meanwhile they dreamed and planned for the time when they could realize their ambition and complete the structure of the Saint Demetrios Cathedral as they had originally conceived it. These were the years of the depression and it was not until 1936 that they could actually begin building. It took six years, and in 1942, the Saint. Demetrios Cathedral as we know it today opened its doors. . (Andriotis p. 10)

As the community continued to grow the members realized that their basement church hall could no longer serve their social needs and in 1952 two additional lots were purchased. The Greeks were here to stay in Astoria and the church had to meet the needs of a budding Greek-American community. As a result of this change it was decided to build the much needed community center. After many hardships on May 5th, 1957 the center was completed and consecrated. It was September of that same year when Saint Demetrios opened up its first Day School, with 267 kids, grades Kindergarten through eighth. (Antonopoulos p.77)

In their attempt to then attack the age old problem of enlarging the Church they realized that another site was inevitable and in 1968 an additional site was obtained. With the desire to build a new structure the inception of the present day Saint Catherine and Saint George church

evolved. A committee was formed to raise and build the \$1,093,000 neo-Byzantine, three tiered structure. Groundbreaking took place on September 22, 1971 the ceremonial “opening of the doors” took place and the consecration followed on October 26, 1975.

In 1967, along with all the plans for the new church, ways and means were being sought to alleviate the congestion at Saint Demetrios School, and accommodate the many students on the waiting list. A study was made to renovate the large auditorium of the community center and divide it into classrooms. This idea was shelved as the community was still caught up in the building of Saint Catherine and Saint George. With this new building completed the kindergarten and first grades were moved to the classrooms in September 1974.

Nevertheless, St. Demetrios School was still overcrowded. On October 10, 1974 a building next door to Saint Catherine’s was purchased and was renovated to create more classroom space. To further their aim to educate their young two additional buildings were acquired.

In 1978, the School Expansion Committee was authorized to negotiate with architectural firms for the design of the Saint Demetrios High School building and the development of construction plans. A committee was formed and undertook the task to raise the necessary funds.

On January 30, 1981, ground breaking ceremonies took place with His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos. The contractor was required to complete the building for occupancy by September 1982. Working diligently with the architect and the contractor, the School Expansion Committee supervised the work and the Saint Demetrios High School building was completed much earlier and its design received an award from the Queens Chamber of Commerce.

On May 9, 1982, the ceremonial “cutting of the ribbon” took place marking the opening

of the one and only Greek-American High School in America.

The History of Saint Demetrios Greek-American School of Astoria

1956-2012

The Saint Demetrios Greek-Orthodox Church of Astoria was founded in 1927 by a small group of immigrants. Twelve families with great religious faith and determination worked progressively to attain a church for their needs. Since their financial means were limited, they were unable to purchase a building to worship, but acquired a lot where the present structure of the Saint Demetrios cathedral now stands, pitched a tent and conducted church services under it until enough funds could be raised to start construction. Not before long, the basement of the church was built. The children gathered there for Sunday school classes. During the year 1937, the upper floor of the building was completed.

The church served as a vital nucleus for the faithful immigrants and the community grew rapidly. The thought of a day parochial school had ripened and in 1957 an educational miracle took place, the first Greek-American parochial school in Queens opened its doors to 276 students. As those children crossed the threshold, they carried with them the future of the community.

The objectives of the school were to give children of the members of the community an educational program including a complete American curriculum with the teaching of the Greek language, the Greek Orthodox religion and culture in an environment characterized by strict discipline and a Christian morality. With such an educational program, the parents hoped to prepare their children to become good American citizens without forgetting their Greek roots and religion.

Through the years, factors such as normal population growth, influx of Greek-American and eventually immigrants coming from Greece contributed to the second church. A crusade for the realization of this new dream then began. The Board of Trustees adopted their theme phrase “We believe..., Therefore We Build” proceeded earnestly and worked with energy, courage and faith to reach their goal. Finally, in 1972 the annex church of Saint Catherine and Saint George was erected. (Andriotis p. 32)

From 1958 until 1974, the school operated in the same building without, any significant reforms. With the influx of more Greek-American families in Astoria, the educational needs of the community multiplied and the Parish Council took the appropriate steps to meet these new demands. A School Expansion Program was duly introduced and in 1974 the Kindergarten and Primary grades were relocated at the Saint Catherine and Saint George church building. In 1976, a new school building was added adjacent to Saint Catherine and Saint George church. In 1977 property was purchased next to the Saint Demetrios church to accommodate any future plans for school expansion. (Andriotis p. 51)

The decision of the general assembly on April 8, 1976, to establish the first Greek-American High School in the United States was the milestone for the community’s educational progress. The dream which had been nourished so fervently for so many years by every Greek American became a reality for Astoria.

The Saint Demetrios community which had its’ humble beginnings in a basement structure, built by a few stalwart pioneers has now developed into the largest Greek-Orthodox community in the United States. The Saint Demetrios Parochial School is also the largest operating Greek-American school with the only High School, outside of Greece.

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