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Macedonia Schools Project Newsletter September 2023

Welcome to the second issue of the Macedonia Schools Project (MSP) Newsletter. The 2023 funds to schools in Macedonia from awarded grants have been received and put to work. Stojan Koccev from Vanco Prke School in Stip sent us his thanks, "Extreme gratitude to MSP for the generous donation, which will help the classroom conditions for the children and enable them to succeed in the future." Look forward to a complete report of what the 2023 MSP grant funds have accomplished in the December issue of the MSP Newsletter.

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Why Young People Should Be Involved in the Macedonia Schools Project By Sasha Agapiev, MSP Board Member

When I first joined the Macedonia Schools Project (MSP), I was just finishing my sophomore year of high school. As with most young high school students I was dealing with a lot of different challenges at the time, and I was hesitant to take on any more responsibilities. I thought I barely had enough time to study for my precalculus exams and to make it to my basketball practices, let alone to get involved with charity work. After some personal introspection and goading from my Mom, I finally decided to take the initiative, and I began working on my first MSP project: a local fundraiser to provide sports equipment for schools in Ohrid. I chose this project because I was (and still am) an avid basketball and tennis fan, and playing sports was a big part of my identity, which I didn't know how to live without. Growing up, my family would stay up to odd hours watching Djokovic win Australian Opens and cheering on Serbia and Macedonia in Euro Basket tournaments. One of my favorite memories was storming Skopje's city center with my family and thousands of other Macedonians after we beat host-nation Lithuania by two points in the 2011 FIBA quarterfinals.

Watching these sports made me feel connected to my Balkan identity even when I was cheering from behind a TV screen in Oregon. The love for sports is a universal experience that connects people from all backgrounds, but it wasn't until I started working with MSP that I realized how few Macedonian kids had access to the athletic opportunities I had always taken for granted. The fact that so many middle schools in Ohrid didn't have the

resources for basketball or soccer teams made me feel foolish about how unaware I was of my privilege, and from then on, I started missing a lot less practices.

My name is Aleksandar Agapiev, but most people know me as Sasha. I was born and raised in Portland, Oregon, and I spent all of my life there before moving to New York City in 2019 to pursue a computer science degree at NYU. As of right now, I am still living in New York as I hope to soon finish my master's program in quantitative finance. I am unsure of where this degree will take me, but I hope to work as a quant analyst for a few years before applying to PhD programs.

A lot of my motivation in life has come from my parents, as I have always been impressed by how much they were able to accomplish despite difficult upbringings. My Dad moved from Belgrade to Portland in the 80s to get his PhD from Oregon Health & Science University, and my Mom moved from Skopje to Boston in the 90s for graduate school, which is when the two met. Being the child of first-generation immigrants, I have always felt very close to my Balkan heritage as I grew up speaking Macedonian and Serbian at home, eating traditional Macedonian recipes passed down from older generations, and going to Macedonian events around Portland including Leon Speroff's famous yearly sausage-making party. My family also used to travel back home to Skopje every other summer to visit my grandmother, uncle, and other cousins, and we would occasionally drive down to Bitola to see my Mom's childhood home. Never once did the Macedonian people make me feel like an American or an outsider, and this hospitality has always stuck with me.

I originally joined the Macedonia Schools Project because I wanted to be more involved with Macedonian culture, and also because I wanted to give back to the community for being so welcoming to me. My Mom has been a member of MSP for a while, and she helped get me involved by introducing me to Tom Lineham who guided me on my first fundraising project. Tom has always been by my side since I joined MSP in early 2017, and we have worked on a number of other projects together since then. I am motivated to continue working with MSP in future years to continue the tradition of giving back to Macedonia in the same way that Macedonian culture has given so much to me throughout my life.



Sasha



Sasha Playing Chess with Bratstvo Edinstvo Students

Meet Dr. Alexander Nicoloff, MSP Board Member

I was born and raised in Minnesota, the land of many of a Scandinavian heritage, and I am 25% Norwegian from my mother's side.

But I am also 50% Macedonian from my father's side. My father, Demetre Matthew Nicoloff, was born and raised in Lorain, Ohio. His father, my Dedo, Matthew Eftim Nicoloff's family eventually settled there after emigrating from the village of Pokarvenik, Macedonia, where my Dedo had been a shepherd boy on the hillsides above Lake Prespa when he was 13. When my Starro Dedo (Great Grandfather), Eftim Nicola Yanovski, and Starra Baba, (Great Grandmother) Dola Dimitrova Yanovski (née Dzelovski), came through Ellis Island, as was common practice, the family name was interpreted as, or changed to, Nicoloff based on their Macedonian ethnicity. Baba Dola had been born in the village of Tsaredvor, Macedonia, and grew up in Istanbul, Turkey, before meeting and marrying Eftim in Pokarvenik. My Dedo, "Matt," met my Baba, Blaga "Betty" Korora when they were in high school, and they remained in Lorain, Ohio, the rest of their lives. My Baba's family had come from Bitola, Macedonia, just before she was born.

As a child visiting my family in Ohio, which was now a very large, extended family of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and family friends who were just like family, felt to me like going back to the "old country," rich with so much of the ethnic culture and food of Macedonia. Stuffed peppers from Baba's Garden, homemade bread, sausage, feta cheese, and my favorites, zelnick and bonitsa. (Fun side note, my father and Dr. Leon Speroff, another MSP board member, were childhood friends.)

The Macedonian language was still the language of conversation among my family members in Ohio, and my father, too, would quickly fall back to speaking Macedonian instead of English. They would all speak English to me, however, so unfortunately, I never learned the language except for some nursery rhymes, and a few other choice words that I still cherish.

Education was very important to my family as soon as they were able to obtain it. My Dedo and Baba made it their number one priority to send their three children to school. They worked hard in the steel mill and their small store to give their children a college education, which they themselves never had, and then supporting my father through medical school and both his sisters, my aunts, through nursing school. Every member of the generations that followed my grandparents has pursued a college or higher level of education, including myself, having graduated from medical school in 1992. All thanks to the appreciation of education instilled in us by my Macedonian grandparents.

It is a privilege to be involved in the Macedonian Schools Project, maintaining the connection to my heritage, and being part of the gift of education and the wonderful things MSP is doing for the children and people of Macedonia.



Dimetre, Blaga, and Matthew Nicoloff, 1972

Meet Emilija Paunkoska, Macedonian Teacher and MSP Board Member

My name is Emilija Paunkoska. I teach in Bratstvo Edinstvo, a primary school located in the center of Ohrid. We have about 900 students, and we teach in Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish. The school has two separate buildings, with a 10-minute walk between them. Our school is one of the oldest schools in Ohrid.

The Macedonia Schools Project (MSP) has been a great partner and supporter of our school since 2010. Support began with a few chalk boards, but later our school received grants that paid for LCD projectors, laptop computers, printers, CD players, school supplies, and library books. We have a chess club that started small. MSP support provided modern chess clocks, a projector, and a printer. Now, many chess lovers from all over Ohrid are becoming members of our club, and with the help of MSP and Sasha Agapiev (a Board Member of MSP), the chess club organizes national chess tournaments. We also have a photo club, which has two professional cameras, obtained with the help of an MSP grant. The photo club has attracted many students to be members and won second prize in an international video competition.

Bratstvo Edinstvo has received only a little support from the Municipality and the Ministry of Education in terms of improvement of study conditions. With the help of MSP, we have been able to equip classrooms with 100 student desks, which are used on a daily basis.

When our new curriculum was introduced, all students began to have physical education lessons three times every week. The school has only one gym, and it was impossible to organize all of the student lessons in the gym. With the use of MSP grant funds, we reorganized free space from the canteen to make an additional gym with new equipment. Our new gym is used daily, making the overall organization of physical education lessons much easier. MSP also provided funds for a new ping-pong table and many balls for football, handball, basketball, and volleyball.



Bratstvo Edinstvo never had a science room. With the help of science equipment obtained with MSP grant funds, students are now able to enjoy performing scientific experiments. Our school is the only school in Ohrid that has an English center. We have equipped the English Center Library with many books shipped from the U.S. In addition, with MSP support, we have received a lot of school supplies, a printer, an LCD projector, and a whiteboard. Students have the opportunity to check out books as well as enjoying the warm atmosphere of the Center during English lessons. The English Center is also used for the teaching delivered by teachers in the MSP Volunteer Teaching Program. We believe this is a new and exciting Macedonian teaching experience, and we encourage the participation of more volunteer teachers.



Macedonia has modernized the teaching process. With the help of MSP, we have purchased television sets for a few classrooms that are used daily by the teachers. We also obtained two professional copy machines, and now all of our teachers can print tests and handouts when necessary. Finally, MSP grant money purchased sound equipment for multiple school recitals that we organize each year.



On behalf of the Bratstvo Edinstvo teachers and students, I want to express our sincere gratitude to the MSP for all of the generous assistance we have received during the past 13 years.



Donations & Membership

Please become a member of the Macedonia Schools Project to help the youth of North Macedonia. Your tax-deductible contribution will enhance the growth and impact of our program.

Website: <https://msp.charity/index.php/donations>

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