

A LONG DREAM, AN ARDUOUS JOURNEY, AND A LITTLE HISTORY

October 23, 2020

We have been dreaming about it for a long time. The idea of having a multi-purpose facility next to our church was already in the air when, together with my family, I joined the little congregation at St. Elizabeth Greek Orthodox Church of Gainesville, more than 20 years ago. The initial plan was to have the building erected for occasional events in our congregation, and to rent it out as a source of income for our parish.

The driving force behind the initiative was Leonidas Polopolus (1933-2015), whom many of us knew as “Leo.” He first began pushing for concrete action, hired the first architect(s), and came up with funds using his many contacts in Florida and outside the state. It was Leo who called it “fellowship hall,” a name that reflected the significant change in goals that our growing congregation had set for itself. We wanted to have adequate rooms for activities that, in the meantime, have become more important to our community—Sunday school and coffee hour, offices for the priest and a secretary, and space to organize our annual gala and occasional weddings, baptisms, or other gatherings. From a hindsight perspective, the initial plans were probably too ambitious, when it became quite clear that, without a substantial loan (and the dangers of getting into debt), our little congregation would not be capable of building the fellowship hall all at once. Leo took on the first and most difficult task: before even building the fellowship hall, the entire infrastructure (particularly the water and the sewage system) of our parish property needed an immediate update, in addition to a parking lot that would accommodate not only those attending liturgy every Sunday, but also those who, in the future, would use the fellowship hall.

As it turned out, simply accomplishing those (limited) goals used a good portion of the money that had been raised in the meantime for the entire project. Leo did not give up, though: while the “first phase of the building” was unfolding, he tirelessly campaigned for fundraising. Once work on the “first phase” was done, however, the enthusiasm for the building receded, even though money continued to accumulate slowly, but steadily in a parish fund earmarked for the project. When Leo passed away, many parishioners thought that that was the end of the project as well. However, Leo’s life and work for our community provided the inspiration for the next generation.

When selflessly leading the effort to organize our first Greek festival in many years, Marin Smillov had one goal in mind, and he made that clear at the first preliminary meetings dedicated to that cause: to raise sufficient funds in order to build the fellowship hall. But, like Leo, Marin was not pushing this idea on one front alone. Several building committees have been constituted over the years, the purpose of which was to find ways to continue Leo’s work. None of them went beyond the planning stages. But Marin started the difficult process of obtaining permits from the city administration for having the hall built, albeit in a location different from that initially envisioned by Leo. It is now closer to the entrance of the property, in order to accommodate a possible extension to the south of the church, when needed and possible in the future. He met with city officials, talked to engineers and architects, organized neighborhood meetings to get required approval, but also support. Without Marin’s resilience, determination, and patience, the dream would have long been gone.

However, the flame of that dream is still burning, and will continue to burn. The fruits of Marin’s continuous efforts over more than two years became visible only a month ago. On September 15, 2020, the city of Gainesville finally issued a site permit for the building of the fellowship hall on the northern

side of our parish property, next to the entrance. The permit makes it possible to hire a contractor for the actual building of the hall. When our architect, Ricardo Cavallino will finalize the plans, hopefully before Thanksgiving, the bidding process for hiring a contractor may start. With that, it will be possible to see groundbreaking operations in January or February 2021, and after that the building erected within a few months.

It is important to note that the efforts to raise money for the fellowship hall never stopped and, as mentioned, the fund set aside for that task continued to grow through fundraisers and donations. Last fall, our beloved parishioner Emmanuel Partheniades (1926-2019), bequeathed to our congregation one of his real estate properties in Gainesville. In his will, Manoli, as he was known to many parishioners, did not specify the intended purpose of his bequest. Instead, he wanted that decision to be taken by the parish council, which unanimously decided to sell the property and use all of the proceeds toward building the fellowship hall. This was, after all, in fulfillment of Manoli's own wish, namely to have that long dream come true.

Most, if not all expected costs of the actual building of the hall are now covered by the funds accumulated over the years. However, our next task is what may be called, paraphrasing Leo, "the third phase" of the building: furnishing the interior, especially the kitchen equipped with everything necessary for any and all activities that our congregation will plan in the future. It is not too early to begin a fundraising campaign with that goal in mind. Taking Leo's strategy as a source of inspiration, still good after so many years, it may in fact be a prudent idea. While the flame is still burning, it may be wise to procure more oil for the lamp to guide us through the dark.