



From Greece, with love (and tree sap)

Guest Columnist

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This summer I joined my family on a Greek odyssey. My wife is a second-generation Greek American, and this was a great opportunity for our kids, ages 9 and 11, to experience their cultural heritage on a deep level.

Ironically, by leaving my work (and country) behind and immersing myself in the history and culture of the Greek people, I gained new insights into the importance of the work we do at Legal Aid, and its impact on our country and our culture.

In Athens, we learned about Greeks of unimaginable wealth and power. And they used that wealth and power not only to build wonders such as the Parthenon, but also to control their own destiny.

But in Chios, the small island in the Aegean Sea where my wife's parents were born, we learned how the common people lived, subject to the whims and desires of the wealthy and powerful. Just a few miles off the coast of Turkey, Chios spent centuries in the crosshairs of countless struggles between European and Asian powers.

And what were they fighting over? Tree sap.

Masticha, the fragrant sap of the mastic tree, has been used for millennia in medicine and cooking. And it was a highly valued commodity by empires both east and west of this tiny island. The people of Chios were time and again exploited by foreign regimes and never had the opportunity to build a community of their own,

or to "own" their community. It wasn't until 1912 that the people of Chios finally found freedom from their last oppressor, the Ottoman Empire, and became part of the modern Greek state.

This history runs deep in the culture of the Greek people - the intense divide between wealth and power, and those exploited and cast aside. And as I learned more about it, I couldn't help but draw parallels to our own country and culture.

Because those same themes are true in America, aren't they? Groups of people being downcast, forgotten, used even, for the resources they can bring to bear for the benefit of someone else - someone stronger, richer, more powerful. It's not just our past. It's our present. We live it every day, and we fight it every day.

If you talk to the people in Chios and hear their ancestor's story, it isn't one of pity and reliance. It doesn't smell of laziness or mediocrity or any of the other nasty adjectives we use to describe our country's poor. It's a story of pride, of incredible strength in the face of oppression, of overcoming obstacles - overcoming everything - and taking back control of their lives.

It's a story of the transformative power of opportunity. And that's the core of our vision and mission here at Legal Aid, that all individuals - including those who may be struggling, living in poverty, downtrodden and left behind - should have the same opportunities to control, im-

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prove, and enrich not only their lives, but the lives of those around them. And we believe the law, like no other tool at our disposal, has the power to get us there.

That's equity. That's choice. That's justice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Stacey' in a cursive, flowing script.

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