Children’s Association of Greece and Cyprus

Time flies by when you are as busy as everyone at “The Smile of the Child”. It’s already the end of May as we write our quarterly newsletter. The first part of 2006 was demanding but also very productive. It’s not until we sit down to write that we realize just how much we accomplished and how proud we are of the hard work of our staff and volunteers.

The holiday season is always joyous. It is especially happy when you are privileged enough to have the opportunity of watching the excitement and anticipation of children waiting for Christmas and New Year’s. In a flurry of activities leading to Christmas all seven of our community homes were decorated and filled with the aromas of various Christmas goodies. Thanks to companies and volunteers, Santa Claus arrived and brought gifts that surpassed the wishes of each one of our 160 children. We were blessed with enough items and gifts that we were able to donate many of them to children and families that might otherwise have gone without during this festive season. Children going door-to-door caroling traditionally accompanies New Year’s in Greece. Thanks to our staff and volunteers our children had the opportunity to bring in the new year with music and laughter.

The last weekend in January “The Smile of the Child” hosted the extra-ordinary Board Meeting for the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children. Thanks to the generosity of the Astir Palace Hotel, our guests enjoyed 5 star treatment during their stay! Board members made key decisions on how to proceed on various issues during the meeting. One of the key issues was of course the creation of a European three or four digit hotline for missing children. As well, membership criteria for new organizations was discussed. During the press conference on the last day, Greek government officials from various Ministries attended. The result was a pledge from the Greek government to work more closely with “The Smile of the Child” and our Federation. As
well, the Greek Foreign Ministry has agreed to assist financially in the creation of missing children’s centers in developing European countries! While we worked hard during the meeting, there was time for our members to visit the Acropolis and get a taste of the Greek nightlife. All agreed that Athens is a vibrant city with much to offer. We cannot of course, leave out the memorable visit of Baron Cardon to our community home in Marousi. He was welcomed by 23 of our children and was treated to a musical recital by three-year-old Vasili. Within minutes of his arrival it was clear that he was a member of our extended family. From the expression on Baron Cardon’s face it was clear that he was as thrilled to be there as we were to have him.

In the late afternoon of Friday February 3rd, in Veria (northern Greece), 11-year-old Alex Mexisvili, on his way to an art class after a basketball game with his friends, went missing. His mother contacted the Smile of the Child almost immediately. We pressed media to publicize his disappearance immediately in the hope that information leading to his location might be forthcoming. We created posters that have been placed in every possible public space throughout Greece. With our assistance several television programmes were dedicated to finding Alex. Our hotline “SOS 1056” was used and continues to be used by people to report information. In April and again in May we visited the town to work with his parents and Greek police. This is the first time in Greece that law enforcement has accepted assistance from a non-government organisation. While there are some leads that police are still investigating, Alex is still missing. We will continue to do whatever we can in an attempt to bring Alex back to the safety of his family.

In February Child Helpline International invited us to their European conference in Budapest. Firstly, we would like to extend our sincerest thanks to Eva Kerpel-Young and Kek-Vonal for their warm hospitality. Through their efforts we were treated to fabulous Hungarian cuisine and we experienced the magic of Budapest. It was unanimous amongst the attendees that Budapest is a city straight out of a fairy-tale and worth visiting again. The conference was not all sightseeing and eating. Many important issues affecting helplines were discussed. As everyone
knows, SOS 1056 is not only a hotline for missing and exploited children, but also functions as a helpline. We were particularly interested in learning how other helplines around the world deal with “prank” calls. It is significant to note that experts in the field pointed out that what we often perceive as crank calls are actually “test” calls enabling children to establish communication with someone.

One of the results of the conference was an agreement that we needed some well-known experts to explain the phenomenon of test calls so that the public and our sponsors understand their significance. As non-profit organizations, we were all interested in hearing fund-raising ideas from our colleagues around the world. We came away with some new ideas on how to raise money that will enable us to reach more children.

Everyone who has visited our Creative Entertainment Centre in the Athens International Airport, “Eleftherio Venizelou”, knows how popular the centre has become with visitors from around the world. It provides a haven for parents and children who are traveling. The centre is located in the departure’s level of the airport. It is staffed by qualified personnel who entertain and baby-sit children traveling with their parents. The centre is equipped with books, arts and crafts material and games. There is a visitor’s guest book where we have comments in literally hundreds of languages expressing gratitude for the service. Based on the success of the Centre in Athens, we decided to open a similar centre in the international airport in Thessalonica’s, “Macedonia”. The opening ceremony was held on March 31, 2006. Our President, Costas Yannopoulos, along with the Deputy Ministry from the Ministry of Transportation, cut the ribbon. The Creative Entertainment Centre in Thessalonica has only been
open for a couple of months. From the grateful comments of parents we know that it is already the highlight of the airport and a hit amongst children.

Gearing up for Easter, we had our own fundraising event at the Constitution Square metro station. From April 3rd until the 12th, we sold hundreds of Easter candles and various other handcrafted items. It was estimated that hundreds of thousands visited our bazaar to purchase their Easter decorations and gifts and to learn more about the Association. The event was a clear success thanks to the hard work of our staff and volunteers who worked overtime to ensure everyone who visited walked away as a happy customer.

Our Missing Children department has continued to work tirelessly to locate missing children in and out of Greece. We have our posters in every airport, police station, seaport and public space within Greece. We regularly appear on television searching for children that have gone missing because they have run-away, a non-custodial parent or a stranger has abducted them. We work with local and international law enforcement, with Ministries of Justice and prosecutors. Part of our mandate is to continue lobbying Greek politicians and bureaucrats in an effort to have parental abduction investigated more vigorously. One of our success stories was in February 2006. A fourteen-year-old girl ran away from her home. With no word of her whereabouts, her parents turned to us. We immediately contacted television stations and used broadcasts to communicate with her. By convincing her that she
would not be in trouble and that we wanted to know that she was safe, we were able to persuade her to return to her grateful parents. While this case had a happy ending, many of our cases remain unsolved.

Our work with missing children emphasized to us the importance of a coordinated effort with law enforcement and the media. Based on these needs, we visited our partners at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. For the whole week commencing on April 10th, Costas Yannopoulos and Maggie Lazaridis were in Washington D.C. trying to absorb as much as possible. Ernie Allen, Jessica Derder and the rest of the NCMEC team were incredibly hospitable and helpful. We met with experts in almost every department and gathered information. It was agreed that Greek law enforcement would benefit greatly from the training NCMEC offers and we are currently speaking to officials from the Ministry of Public Order to find agreeable dates for training sessions. Equally important, we have taken the first steps to bring Robert Hoever and the AMBER alert programme to Greece. If all goes according to plan, Greece will have an AMBER alert programme by early 2007. We want to thank everyone at NCMEC for sharing their valuable time and experience with us. Easter in Greece is the biggest religious holiday. Many would say that it is celebrated on an equal if not grander scale than Christmas.

With a week off from school, our children had time to prepare themselves for the celebrations. Eggs were dyed and decorated, treats were baked and our community homes were again decorated. We all attended church services near our homes and Easter Sunday was spent laughing, listening to music while waiting for the lambs that were roasting.

As all our members know, “The Smile of the Child” relies upon sponsorship and donations of private companies and individuals. This spring we have been fortunate enough to have several fund-raising events held for us. Following the revelry of Easter, our children waited in anticipation for a day at Allou Fun Park. Novartis Pharmaceuticals contacted us and offered to host the event. On April
employees from the company were paired up with each of our children and the groups spent a day playing games, riding all the amusement park rides and stuffing themselves with delicious, non-nutritious treats. Everyone had the opportunity to be a child for the day.
On May 5, 6, 7 and again on May 12, 13 and 14th, Direction Publications hosted the first annual “Business Tennis Open, ATHENS 2006”. The event was held at the Olympic tennis courts. A portion of the proceeds from the entrance fees was donated to “The Smile of the Child”. Corporations and politicians participated. The event was successful and by consensus it was agreed that it would become an annual event.

Given the achievement of last year’s International Missing Children’s Day at the Acropolis, this year the City of Athens gave us a permit to host the event at Constitution Square. On May 25, 2006 we gathered at Constitution Square, in the heart of downtown Athens. Children from public and private schools, mothers of missing children, politicians, celebrities and the media were all on hand to watch the release of 2000 periwinkle blue and white balloons. As well, we took the opportunity to hold a press conference regarding our intention to bring the AMBER alert programme to Greece. Everyone present wore the forget-me-not pins. The event was significant because it marked the commitment of all those present to continue in our struggle to bring our children home safely.
The hard work and untiring efforts of Mr. Daniel Counio and the Rotary Club Athenes Elysee (District 2470) resulted in the first every concert of the Swiss Choeur D’Oratorio De Montreux in Athens! The choir graciously agreed to perform free of charge and performed music by Schubert, Fauré, Theodoraki, Dvorak, Mozart, Rossini and Verdi. The concert was held at the Lyriky Skini (the opera house) and all proceeds from ticket sales were donated to “The Smile of the Child”. Following the incredible recital there was a dinner held to honour members of the community for their outstanding contributions in helping us never say “no” to a child that needs us. It was indeed ironic that the Rotary Club honoured others when they too can be counted as members of our extended family who have showed their dedication and commitment in helping us.

As the school year is approaching its end, our staff and volunteers are busy helping our children with school examinations and tests. Everyone knows that we have to work extra hard this spring so that we can enjoy the good weather and beautiful Mediterranean waters that await us during our summer holidays.