

***Address by the Rector, Prof. Constantinos Christofides, entitled
“Great Cypriots”
Graduation Ceremony, 27 June 2017***

Dear Graduates,

As we all know, the potential of a nation is determined by the potential of its education, and hence by the potential of its universities.

There are numerous Cypriots, both men and women, who have defined the fate, the course and the history of our country. Two of them will be mentioned today, since they are considered to be models for all of us to draw inspiration and create our own original and—why not—unconventional way. If you are not willing to risk for the unusual, you are doomed to have to compromise with the trite.

Tonight, I will talk to you about two great Cypriots, an athlete and a political intellectual. What might these two have in common? Actually, the passionate and unselfish love for their homeland. Their attitude in life can teach us a lot.

I will start with a great figure of Greek sports, the hero of a whole era, Stylianos (Stelios) Kyriakides.

Stelios was born into a poor family living in a humble farm house in the mountain village of Statos, near Paphos, Cyprus, on January 15, 1910. He was the youngest of five children of Yiannis and Eleni Kyriakides. He left school at the age of 14 to help his family and it was completely by chance that he got involved with sports.

In the 1932 Pancyprrian Games, Kyriakides won four times within two days: The 1500, 5000, 10000 meters and the half-marathon. It was quite obvious that Cyprus was too small a place for him. Therefore, he went to Greece and soon became a member of the Greek national track and field team. His star shone brightly during the 1934 Balkan Games held in Zagreb, where he broke the record held by the 1896 Olympic Games winner Spyridon (Spypos) Louis, thus setting a new European record.

He was 24 years old back then, and the whole country started talking about him as a world-class runner.

He competed for Greece in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, placing 11th. This is where he also made an important acquaintance, which defined the rest of his course. He met with another marathoner, Johnny Kelley, who invited him to participate in the world-famous Boston Marathon.

In 1938, Stelios Kyriakides went to Boston, where he was hailed by the whole Greek community. He was in top shape, but was eventually betrayed by the brand-new pair of sport shoes the Greeks of Boston gifted him for the marathon race. You should never wear new shoes for such a race, though!...

Kyriakides quit with bleeding feet in the middle of the race, to the great disappointment of the Greeks waiting for him at the finish line. But just before he left Boston, in an interview to sports editor Jerry Nason, he made the promise that one day he would return to win the Boston Marathon.

Meanwhile, World War II breaks out in 1940, and the Nazis occupy Athens in 1941. The Greek nation lives in poverty and famine. Kyriakides and his family struggle to survive. Death lurks at every corner of Athens and the eyes of the starving children mark Stelios Kyriakides profoundly. Occupied Athens soon transforms into an endless graveyard; people are executed daily and the death toll of famine reaches 250.000, alone during the first winter of the occupation.

In 1946, amidst a ravaging civil war, in a time no hope was in sight, Kyriakides decides to run the Boston Marathon again, this time spurred by the prospect of collecting aid for the ruined homeland, also hoping to draw attention to the drama Greece was experiencing at the time. He was already 36 years old; hungry, bedraggled, already six years without training.

With help provided by the Greek expats, he reaches the United States in April 1946. "I have come to run for Greece", he says upon his arrival.

He undergoes medical examinations. His rawboned body and his troubled face were reflecting the suffering of a whole nation. The doctors forbid him to run, fearing that he might die during the race. The Greek-American George Dimitrakopoulos steps in to let Stelios run. He tells the doctors that the responsibility will be borne by Greece. Kyriakides runs wearing the number 77. He outraces his friend Johnny Kelley in the last mile. He remembers how a Greek immigrant shouted from the crowd and overwhelmed him, filling his soul with the strength to beat his own body. As he crosses the finish line first, he is heard shouting "For Greece!" with all his strength. He wins the race in 2:29:27, a new world record for 1946.

The man who lived in the shadow of death for six years broke the national record by 16 minutes.

"All I could see in front of me during the whole race was my children, Acropolis, and the Greek flag", he said later.

US president Harry Truman asked Johnny Kelley how come he lost the race by a skinny, frail Greek. Kelley said: “How could I ever beat such an athlete? I was running for myself, he was running for a whole country, for 7 million hungry Greeks”.

It was the 20th of April 1946. However, Kyriakides’ great victory was not completed at the finish line. Capitalizing on his subsequent fame, Kyriakides started a huge campaign to garner aid for the Greek people; food, medicines, clothing, money. All Greek-Americans embraced this effort and Kyriakides managed to collect supplies that would take two whole ships to transport.

It was an aid that saved thousands of lives back in the devastated homeland. Everybody in the United States heard about the drama of Greece—consciences were awakened. But this victory also awakened the Greeks, and reminded them of their existence and of the inexhaustible powers of their nation.

In May 1946, amidst the continuing civil war, Greece welcomes Kyriakides back, celebrating him as a national hero. Over one million people line the streets of Athens, from the airport to the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in front of the Parliament, to greet him.

Stelios passed away on December 10, 1987. Today, we are reminded of his great victory in Boston by two statues, an original in Marathon and a true copy in Boston. The sculptures present Spyros Louis showing Stelios Kyriakides the way to victory.

In April 2016, I met the former Governor of Massachusetts and Presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in Armenia. He was teaching international relations at the American University of Yerevan. When we were introduced to each other, he told me: “I was 13 years old when your man, the Cypriot Stelios Kyriakides, won the Boston Marathon. I felt very proud to be Greek on that day”.

You might be wondering why I made this reference to Stelios Kyriakides’ struggle. It’s because his firmness, his rigid spirit in front of all hardships, his persistence, his certainty that he could distinguish himself, his lion-heartedness, and his perseverance are traits that should characterize every young person in his/her effort to walk a lonely and unique way.

The talent and commitment shown by Stelios, as well as his enormous spiritual strength and discipline is what led him to success. It is precisely this magic combination that you, dear graduates, are also called upon to discover in yourselves in order to succeed.

Nobody can promise that everything will be generously offered to you in life. Nevertheless, your University has equipped you with a solid background so as to start your own race. May the runner Stelios Kyriakides be your guide in the metaphorical track of what we call life; a demanding, fluctuating track, but one full of surprises and challenges!

I will talk to you about yet another true patriot, whom I admired ever since my teenage years—Adam Adamantos, a political intellectual, a scholar of Homer but also of Modern Greek literature, a prolific writer expressing the dream. A man who truly loved our country and dared to brake with the trivial and popular slogans of his time.

Adam Adamantos was born in Deryneia, Cyprus, in September 1904. He was the first elected Mayor of Famagusta after the October 1931 revolt against the British rule. He transformed Famagusta into a modern city in the ten years he was Mayor, from 1943 to 1953. His most distinctive characteristic was a spirit of consent, manifested among others by the fact that he built social housing not only in the part of the city inhabited by Greek Cypriots, but also in the so-called Turkish quarter.

Insightful and a political realist, he did not hesitate to express the view that Cypriots should aspire to self-government rather than to union with Greece.

He was among the very few politicians who dared to defend their beliefs with fervor, regardless of any cost, and managed to make a realistic reading of the historical context of his time, realizing that the vision of a free Cyprus would only be made possible through the peaceful and harmonious cooperation of all communities residing on the island.

Adamantos ranked his love for the homeland above the political party he was serving. In other words, he dared to do the obvious and self-evident, unlike most 'professional' politicians of today, who still find this hard to capture.

Very early, he managed to fathom the importance of working together with all Cypriots for the greater good. He realized that peaceful cohabitation presupposes fair treatment, away from bigotry, self-centeredness and any kind of racial or religious introversion.

In his unfinished poem *Agelaus*, Cavafy writes (translated by Daniel Mendelsohn, 2012):

*It's no longer the time for us to fight each other.
[...]
Words of wisdom. But they weren't heeded.
In the terrible, accursed days
of Cynoscephalae, of Magnesia, of Pydna,
many among the Greeks would recollect
those words of wisdom, which they didn't heed.*

Adamantos lost the elections of May 1953, probably because he was much too different for his times.

The words of wisdom by Adam Adamantos, which weren't heeded, were recollected during the accursed days of the Turkish invasion and occupation. We recall these words every day, as for more than 43 years now we have been living with the consequences of our mistakes, our carelessness, our political folly, and our inability to understand and rationally decode international politics and our geopolitical context.

The most important thing those who knew Adamantos and have had the opportunity to get to know his work have gained is the model of his way of life, his honesty as a member of the Left, as a politician in general, but, above all, as an active citizen who knew to serve his country.

Consensual and reconciling, he was called the 'diamond of the Left'. He strongly upheld his positions in favor of self-determination until the end. But for this reason, he also became a scapegoat. He was accused as enemy of the people and was brutally derided. He was also accused as a rebellion obsessive with the constitution, and as a friend of the British. They even attempted to present him as a traitor who was supporting an independent constitution instead of the union with Greece.

Nevertheless, the political isolation he experienced did not make him change his beliefs all of a sudden. I imagine that the hostile stance of his political wing must have hurt him. But his conscience obliged him to clearly take a stand on the future of his homeland.

When, at the age of 49, he finished his term as Mayor, he wanted to return to education. But all doors were closed for him in Famagusta. He therefore moved to a different city. In 1954, he was hired by the Morphou Teaching College. In 1958, the Teaching College moved to the Pedagogical Academy in Nicosia. So did Adam Adamantos. On April 15, 1959, he passed away at the age of 55. He collapsed in the classroom while teaching his students.

He was buried in his beloved city, Famagusta. A simple inscription can be found on his tomb:
How wonderful humans are, when they are real humans.

A small street in Deryneia has been named after him—the only sign of recognition of the public presence of this charismatic person today. Contrary to Kyriakides, Adamantos has had less strong an impact on collective memory.

However, today we need people like Adam Adamantos more than ever. We need them as bright models of realism, since these people rank their love for the homeland above everything else, above their own desires, their own interest, and the embellished and popular words.

Nicos Kazantzakis once wrote that there are no ideas, there are only people who carry ideas, and these grow as tall as the persons carrying them.

We must rebuild our country as a debt to the memory of people like Adam Adamantos and Stelios Kyriakides.

Be courageous and faithful to your beliefs, just as Adam Adamantos was, even if the cost is high. Ignore populism and all fake merchants of hope. Try to discern who really cares for the next generations instead of for the next elections.

Be even stubborn, and focused on what you have chosen to do, just like Stelios Kyriakides.

These great Cypriots invite us to be daring, to never be downhearted, to never give up at the first obstacle, to always hold fast to our goals and resolutions. They also remind us that it is worth sacrificing ourselves for the principles and ideals that transcend our egos and our personal interests.

Dear Graduates,

I have always firmly believed that the fate of a nation is not defined by political parties or political movements, nor by what we are used to call the masses of people, which, however, do have a role in history. The fate of a nation is always defined by some select people who are able to synchronize their inner clock with the clock of history.

I hope that in many years from now, another Rector at another ceremony will make reference to some other great Cypriot men and women, who are now amongst you. To acknowledge that you have changed the course of history of our country, that you have opened up new paths, that you have taken our country around the world, to the great labs of science and knowledge, to the great centers of thought and culture.

Choosing the right profession is like finding your soul in this world. Do not forget that university graduates are not only supposed to look for existing jobs. More importantly, they should create jobs; they should be able to think unconventionally and beyond set frameworks.

On behalf of all your teachers, I warmly congratulate you and your parents and families, who have actively supported you throughout your studies. I want you to be proud of your degree as well as of your University, which will stand by you in every step you take from now on, especially in today's difficult conditions. You will always be our children!

Remember, talent is not enough. Talent means to be passionate about something. Take the difficult roads and leave your mark behind.

About a century ago, André Gide, a French novelist and winner of the Nobel prize in literature, wrote that a man cannot discover new oceans if he does not have the courage to sail away from the coast.

In this tough, difficult, and competitive world, the future belongs to the innovators, the bold, the visionaries.

Create, innovate, get inspired by exemplary people.

Stelios Kyriakides ran for 7 million hungry Greeks!

It is time for you to run for one million Cypriots who seek their destiny in history.

Run for this dark, yet bright homeland.

Be the beautiful side of our homeland, be the other Cyprus.

Congratulations on what you have achieved and a good start on what you will achieve.

Thank you!