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Andrews University's First Lady

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Andrews University's First Lady

From Lighthouse to White (or, in this case, red brick) House

Demetra Andreassen's gift of grace and laughter

by Beverly Matiko



Her compact office nestles into the back of the University Relations red brick house on the campus's southwest corner. Seated behind a dainty cherry desk, Demetra Andreassen looks out over a lush late summer landscape.

It is a different scene than the one Andrews University's First Lady is fond of recalling this time of year. The picture window frames a jungle of green—a closely cropped lawn ending abruptly in thick, valley foliage. "The summer scenes I remember most," Mrs. Andreassen recalls, "all contain water. And a lighthouse."

"From the time I was four," she explains, "my family spent our summers on a Greek

island. Its lighthouse was our home. My father was in the navy, and through his position we had access to this wonderful place. We would swim, fish, crush grapes during harvest season, drink warm goats' milk," Mrs. Andreassen recounts. "Some nights were so clear we would read our newspaper by the full moon."

She speaks matter-of-factly and with only a hint of nostalgia as she recalls the road, water, and airways that led from her home in the Athens port of Piraeus to language study in England, and then to college in the United States, her home for the past three decades. She claims that her travels have taught her a great deal and have introduced her to some fine and colorful teachers as well. She happily shares these experiences and encounters.

A particularly memorable lesson in adaptability came from her first work assignment at Newbold College. She traveled to England to learn another language, but soon found herself on her

hands and knees, armed with a knife. "In those days floors were coated with heavy wax," she remembers, "and my job was to scrape off the excess from the classroom floors. I remember tearfully wondering why on earth I had left my job as a secretary in a prestigious Athens law firm for such a task."

Despite encountering pronounced differences in work, religion, and culture, the young student from Greece enjoyed a successful school year. She learned English. And she made many new friends in the process. Among them was a young Danish student, Niels-Erik Andreassen. He was enrolled in the religion program and maintained a particularly strong interest in the sciences.

After a summer of work at a Greek restaurant and at the Greek embassy in London, Demetra Lougani enrolled at Newbold College for a second year, thanks to an American sponsor. She converted to Adventism during that school year and returned to Greece and employment as a Bible worker.

Her next move would take her even

farther from home. This time she journeyed to the United States where she studied home economics at Andrews University.

While Newbold College's waxy floors had taught her a few things about cultural differences and the student's lot, Andrews offered a few surprises as well. "I remember one of my food science labs," Mrs. Andreasen smiles. "My teacher docked me for not using the garbage disposal. I had no idea what it was or how to use it." She hastens to add, "I think we've become more sensitive to the needs and experiences of our foreign students since then."

One of the Andrews courses she remembers most fondly was Art in Everyday Living. She credits her professor, Dr. Martha Lorenz, with awakening her interests and talents in the arts and humanities. "Dr. Lorenz gave me an A in a project," Mrs. Andreasen recalls. "That grade still surprises me. I was so unsure about what was expected of me, but my teacher encouraged me and gave me extra time for examinations. I've never forgotten that kindness and consideration."

Demetra Lougani was not alone in adjusting to life as a foreign student in the U.S. Her Danish friend from Newbold had also traveled to the U.S. to further his studies, and more than just academic interests accompanied this international couple. In September 1965, Demetra Lougani and Niels-Erik Andreasen were married in Portland, Oregon. They returned to Andrews University where Niels-Erik continued his studies in the Seminary.

Winters form one of Mrs. Andreasen's strongest memories of those early Michigan days. She recalls being totally unprepared for the snow and blizzards. The clear winter days tricked her repeatedly. She would look outside, see the bright sun, and conclude that this must be a warm day. She was caught off guard one sunny Friday, she recalls, and nearly froze her feet walking to vespers. "My feet were so

painful, I felt like giving up," she recalls. "But my husband just kept saying, 'You have to keep going. You can't quit.'" She hastens to add, "Of course, he was right. And the winters seem much milder to me now."

The winters weren't the only challenges facing the Andreasens during their student days.

"Like so many students we didn't have much money," Mrs. Andreasen recalls.

"Whenever we received a Sabbath dinner invitation, we happily accepted. We knew we'd be able to make up for some of the rather lean eating during the week. Those sorts of kindnesses from teachers and church members are not forgotten," Mrs. Andreasen acknowledges.

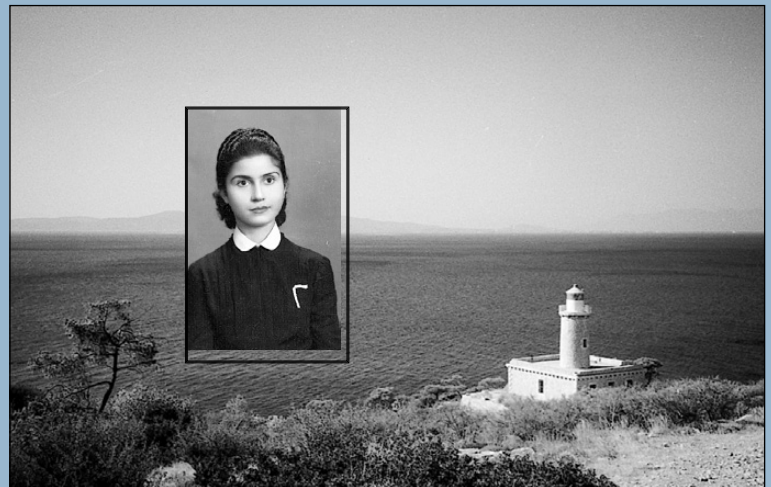
Following their years at Andrews, the Andreasens moved to Tennessee where Niels-Erik pursued further graduate work at Vanderbilt University, and Demetra completed her own studies, graduating with a BSc in social work from Belmont University. She worked as a medical social worker during that time and also gave birth to their son Michael. (Michael is now associate director of university development at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and his wife Marie is a junior high teacher.)

Educational appointments to Pacific Union College and Loma Linda University in California and Avondale College in Australia kept the Andreasens on the move.

Following four years at Walla Walla College where Dr. Andreasen served as president, the Andreasens once again moved back to Andrews University. "We

were overwhelmed by the 'Say Yes to Andrews' campaign that greeted us," Mrs. Andreasen recalls. "We had never seen anything like it."

Dr. Andreasen accepted the position of president of the university, and Mrs. Andreasen began her work as Community Relations Coordinator.



Mrs. Andreasen's childhood holidays were spent at a lighthouse on a Greek island. Inset: Demetra Lougani in 1955.

Mrs. Andreasen describes her current role at Andrews as providing a liaison between the university and the community. "I see myself as someone who can help to break down barriers and build bridges," she says.

She serves on a number of boards, including the United Way, Southwestern Michigan Volunteer Center, Women in Renewal, and Lakeland Regional Health Systems Community Benefits Committee. "I assess the needs of the community," she explains, "and then try to match those needs with the resources of this university."

The fund-raising and community service activities she has been involved with include the Parade of New Homes in St. Joseph and the United Way Day of Caring. Speaking of her work with the Antiquarian and Historical Society, she says, "It was a pleasure to bring a women's group to campus to visit the Horn Museum. They liked it so much they

asked us to schedule a second tour so they could come back and bring their husbands."

Landscaping the area around Ox Creek in Benton Harbor is one of the recent projects that Mrs. Andreasen found particularly rewarding. She worked together with Mr. Stanley Beikmann, instructor in agriculture, who enlisted one of his classes for project planning. Students from Andrews Academy and Benton Harbor provided the labor, planting bulbs near the creek. "It was the first time some of these students had done any sort of planting or landscaping," Mrs. Andreasen recalls. "When they first handled the daffodil bulbs, some of them remarked, 'Why are we planting these? They're dead!' A brief, elementary botany lesson later, the students became convinced that their efforts would not be in vain.

"The Points of Light Foundation recognized the value of this project, and the Southwest Michigan Volunteer Center received an award from them," Mrs. Andreasen gratefully acknowledges. "We were glad Andrews had a part in that project."

Mrs. Andreasen also devotes considerable time to campus organizations, including the Arboretum Council, the European Club, the Newbold Alumni Association, and the Women's Scholarship Committee. Those who have worked closely with Mrs. Andreasen on her various projects both on and off campus are quick to praise her many talents. One of her friends observes, "She doesn't take herself too seriously. She has the gift of laughter, and can even laugh at herself."

Mrs. Andreasen traces at least part of this quality to her heritage. "I'm a Greek, and we believe in fun," she explains. "Being is more important than doing. Sometimes I worry that in this country and culture we can get so caught up with busy-ness, that we lose our sense of self. If

we're not careful, we can find ourselves tossed around like little ships on a big ocean."

To help preserve that sense of self and celebration that is so vital, Mrs. Andreasen often entertains, both at home and at larger university functions. "Entertaining energizes me," she claims. "My mother was widowed at an early age," Mrs. Andreasen recounts. "Much of my family life consisted of my mother, my sisters, and myself. Perhaps this is why I find myself so drawn to the company of women—and, in particular, to single, divorced and widowed women. I enjoy providing an opportunity to get together with groups of women, particularly when my husband is out of town."

Those who have enjoyed the comforts of her home and the delicacies of her kitchen are quick to acknowledge her talents in interior decorating and cooking.

"Everything she does is done with simplicity, grace, and elegance," one friend observes. "She places quality above quantity."

"Much of the redecorating and improvements you'll find in and around the University Relations building are due directly to Mrs. Andreasen's creativity and ingenuity," remarks Dr. Douglas Jones, director of university relations at Andrews. A quick glance around convinces visitors of the First Lady's fondness for burgundy, rose, and pink.

Two display plates with classical Greek scenes adorn one of Mrs. Andreasen's office walls. Together with a set of

etchings of British cathedrals on the opposite wall, they remind visitors of some of the places that Mrs. Andreasen has called home. But perhaps no item is more telling than the little memento on a side table. Sitting next to a carefully preserved rose is a small lighthouse. While it may not be an exact replica of her childhood summer home on a Greek island, it reminds Mrs. Andreasen of the important links between childhood memory and grown up mission. Hers is a mission that can perhaps best be summed up in this New Testament beacon: "walk as children of light . . . for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true" (Ephesians 5:8-9, RSV).



Mrs. Andreasen met former presidential adviser George Stephanopolous last spring at an event of The Economic Club of Southwestern Michigan. "He was pretty distracted signing autographs," she recalls.

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Beverly Matiko is an associate professor of English and communication. She has taught at Canadian University College and Newbold College.