



Chicago's Orpheus dance troupe performs at a small amphitheater near Finikouda Beach in Kalamata, Greece.

All photos courtesy of Orpheus Folklore Society

# Homeland Journey

*Orpheus Hellenic Folklore Society brings Greek pride from Chicago to Kalamata*

By Amalia Deligiannis and Vasiliki Grosso

**E**imaste Etho (We are here)," shouted Yannis Economou as he and a long line of dancers concluded their parade through the streets of Finikouda in Kalamata, Greece, singing traditional Greek songs and playing instruments. The performance in Finikouda was the first of three given by the Orpheus Hellenic Folklore Society during their trip last summer. They also performed in Ancient Messini, in the village of Mavromati, and in Kalamata at the famous Kastro Amphitheater.

Approximately 200 members of Glenview, Ill.-based Orpheus and their families made the voyage. Members of the Chicago Hellenic Choir, under the direction of Efthimia Papageorgiou, also accompanied the troupe.

Their purpose: to develop a stronger connection with their roots and to gain a better understanding of Greek history.

"There was a strong desire to experience the overwhelming pride and joy of performing dances in the land where they originated hundreds of years ago," explained Economou, principle instructor of the troupe. "This trip offered them lessons in culture, history, geography and language. The trip was also an homage to the Greek immigrants in the United States and abroad, who transplanted their culture wherever they went. In addition, the trip offered Orpheus the opportunity


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to demonstrate to Greeks in the motherland that Hellenic spirit and pride lives on in Chicago.

"We didn't just want to show them Greek dances and songs," said Orpheus member Bessie Grosso, and an organizer of the trip. "We wanted to make our mark as the Greek immigrant experience coming back and what that meant to us."

In addition to the three performances, the group met with members of the Kalamata Branch of the Lykeion Dance Group for several workshop sessions. They also went swimming at the beaches of Stoupa and Finikounda, and visited various sites around the Kalamata area, including Ancient Olympia, Methoni, Diros caves and Ancient Messini.

The following are reflections from some members of Orpheus on this momentous trip back to the homeland. 

To view the complete essays from Orpheus's trip, or for more information, visit [www.ohfs.org](http://www.ohfs.org).

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## The march into town

**THE ANTICIPATION** of the trip was breathtaking. All the months of intense preparation and rehearsals built an indescribable degree of excitement.

**THE DAY** came when we were all parading down the streets of Finikounda, heading toward our first performance location, dressed in beautiful costumes, singing and playing, surrounded by locals and tourists who were cheering for us from taverns and balconies.

**IT WAS THRILLING!** At that moment, as I was watching the children sing their hearts out, I realized the depth of what they were experiencing. They were

experiencing Greece as deeply as they could possibly experience it, through all of their senses, both literally and metaphorically.

**THE CHILDREN** were able to see all the places they had heard about. They heard their own Greek singing voices and dance steps echo against ancient Greek ruins. They danced and sang while smelling and tasting the salty ocean air that we had described to them during rehearsals. They physically touched everything that surrounded them and were touched by it all, but they also touched every single person that witnessed their unbelievable performances. Their senses were

stimulated in a way that no other experience here in Chicago could possibly offer.

**THE TRIP** to Kalamata served as the ultimate Greek experience. It was a cultural lesson, a history lesson, a geography lesson, a language lesson and more. And all of those lessons were "hands-on," "ears-on," "eyes-on," and "hearts-on." It doesn't get any more real than that. The experience impacted all of us deeply and, at the same time, we impacted those around us. We were able to demonstrate with pride that we do all we can to keep the Greek spirit alive and pass it on to our children.

—Eftihia Papageorgiou



## Not just "crazy Americanakia" . . . . .

**THE 2007** trip to Greece was not the typical wake up at noon every day, eat and then go to the beach when the sun is at its hottest peak, while people call you the crazy *Americanakia*.

**THIS SUMMER**, there was hard work and dedication put into preparing and performing this very culturally uplifting event. Waking up every morning at eight, after going to bed at four a.m., did get to be a bit of a drag. But since everyone was together,

we were all experiencing the same feelings and exhaustion.

**DAILY** we went to breathtaking sites but what made the experience even better was that 180 of our friends and family were dripping in sweat together.

**WALKING** into [Finikounda], we were greeted by hundreds of people with smiles and amazement on their faces. I remember all of us singing together, while the *yiayias* and the *papous* were

on their balconies crying and singing along. Walking through the center of town to the theater was such an eye opening experience. I wish I could explain the emotions and thoughts that raced through my mind.

**FOR ONCE** we put all the stress to the side, and sang while live music was playing, walking to the theater with pride, and showed Greece that we are no longer the stupid *Americanakia*.

—Catherine Grosso