

NELSON MANDELA AWARD
United Nations General Assembly Virtual Meeting
Monday, 20 July 2020

Speech of Mrs. Marianna V. Vardinoyannis, laureate of the Nelson Mandela Award 2020

- Your Excellency, Mr. President of the General Assembly,**
- Your Excellency, Mr. Secretary-General,**
- Your Excellency, Minister Pandor,**
- Distinguished representative of the City of New York,**
- Your Excellencies:**
 - Chairs of the UN Regional Groups,**
 - Permanent Representative of the United States,**
 - Permanent Representatives,**
 - Members of the Selection Committee,**
- Dr. Morissanda Kouyaté, honored laureate,**
- Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great privilege for me to stand before you and humbly accept the prestigious Nelson Mandela Award 2020.

It is difficult to find words to express my thankfulness and my profoundest gratitude to the United Nations, to Your Excellency Mr. President of the General Assembly, Your Excellency Mr. Secretary-General and the members of the Selection Committee.

I could never have imagined, that I would, one day, receive such an immense honour and feel so greatly moved.

I would like to warmly congratulate Dr. Morissanda Kouyaté on this outstanding distinction and his remarkable work!

I grew up in a small town, Ermioni. During the turbulent times of the Greek civil war, they tried to arrest my father, so, we were forced to escape to Piraeus, in a tiny boat, on a stormy winter night and we lived as refugees there until the end of the war.

My mother always believed that education was the greatest value for humanity. She encouraged me to attend high school in Athens and I was very sad to leave home.

During my studies, I met Vardis, a young naval officer from the island of Crete. We got married and we started our lives together at a very young age.

I followed him on his missions and pursued my University studies abroad.

The first years were very difficult because of the dictatorship in Greece. My husband was opposed to it and was expelled from the Navy, imprisoned and then sent into exile. Although, I had a new-born baby and two young children, I felt the need to support him, so I followed him into exile. Fighting for human rights, became a part of my life.

After our return, we were blessed to see our lives changing radically, for the better, for us and our five children.

I always felt the need to give back to people, who were not so fortunate.

I am grateful to my mother, who taught me the first humanitarian lessons, as she was always devoted to people-in-need.

In the 90s, many children lost their lives from cancer in Greece. The dramatic efforts of parents to raise money and take their children abroad, for cancer therapy, inspired me to establish "ELPIDA", meaning "hope", and the first, Bone Marrow Transplant Unit in Greece.

In the beginning, it was very hard on me to witness the real tragedy faced by parents and I could not sleep, thinking of the tear filled eyes of mothers, who desperately looked to me for help.

So, I took the decision to stay strong and I even went to operating rooms to encourage them during the difficult operations.

This decision became the "motto" I live by: "It is worth fighting for even one child's life and I will never give up".

We had to fight cancer but also prejudice and discrimination, towards cancer patients, and we finally succeeded in changing mentalities.

ELPIDA united the Greeks, for a noble goal: to cure four out of four children!

In 30 years, we accomplished:

- The first Oncology Children's Hospital in Greece.
- 1.200 transplantations.
- 150.000 hospitalizations.
- Thousands of children cured from Greece, Mediterranean, and Balkans.
- A Guest House that hosted more than 3000 families.
- Affiliations, with the greatest hospitals in the world.

- The bone marrow bank with over 100.000 volunteer donors.

My strongest hope is a world without borders for children's health.

This fight can be our platform of peace and solidarity.

After I had fulfilled my lifetime dream, my studies in History of Art and Archeology, as a grandmother, I was greatly honoured to receive the appointment of UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador.

A challenge that gave a global perspective to my efforts through the goals and ideals of the United Nations.

I learned a lot from Nelson Mandela's example, his fighting spirit, his passion, his determination, his courage and his ideas. In our life, we need inspiration and examples, to give us strength and inner power to go on. Nelson Mandela was my inspiration and I was deeply moved when he was appointed UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. For me, he was more than a leader and a visionary.

He was, and will always be, a universal symbol of humanism.

His motivating words "It always seems impossible until it's done" are being proven right, every day, by ELPIDA's children, who win the battle against cancer.

Being the keynote speaker at the 70th Anniversary of UNESCO, paying tribute to his memory, marked my life.

I strongly believe that each one of us has come in this world with a purpose.

Nelson Mandela's legacy is a great treasure for humanity. When people stand united, we can succeed to build a shared future together. And this is vital in the tragic times of the Covid-19 pandemic. **For the "day after"!**

President Mandela said: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". I am committed to this cause, as I believe in the power of education and young people for building better societies. For human rights to which I devote my work.

In this work, I was not alone. I am truly grateful to the doctors, nurses, volunteers, members of ELPIDA, the Greek people, who supported us, through team work and collective action and became part of this miracle.

And of course, nothing would be accomplished without the full support of my beloved family, my husband Vardis, our children and grandchildren.

This Prize does not belong to me. Belongs to my country and I dedicate it to the Greek people.

Today, more than ever, let us all follow in the footsteps of Nelson Mandela for a world of peace, freedom, democracy, equality and solidarity.

Adopt his words of wisdom:

“...Rising, everytime we fall”!

“We can change the world and make it a better place. It is in our hands to make a difference”!

Thank you very much!