

PEOPLE

LOCAL LIVES

AGATHA KALISPERAS

Agatha Kalisperas is the director of The Hellenic Centre on Paddington Street. She lives in Hampstead Village and is also a magistrate

I was born in Nicosia, Cyprus, but left at the age of 17 to study architecture in Athens. I got engaged very young and came to England in the late 1960s, so I have been in London most of my life – although I still have an accent. I studied psychology at London University and then did a masters degree in management at Surrey University. A single mother bringing up two sons, I ran a private hostel for female university students and then I had a small property company.

In 1996 The Hellenic Centre rang to ask if I could take over, just to help them for six months because the director had left. A friend of mine advised me not to, saying that it would be very difficult, but I like a challenge. That was in January 1997 – and I'm still here.

The centre was established in 1994 to provide a focus for the Hellenic community based in the UK and to promote Hellenic culture. We host many lectures and exhibitions. English people love Greece and its ancient history, and 95 per cent of our lectures are in English. We are not just for Greeks – we are for everybody. We have a wonderful Steinway piano and host many concerts. Most of our events are free of charge and in times of financial difficulty it is important that people have a place to go and still have access to culture. There's a lot of culture in London, but you usually have to pay.

The Hellenic Centre runs Greek language courses at lunchtime

and in the evening. We have 350 students, and the last time I counted there were 38 different nationalities learning Greek here.

The centre does not belong to any government, something we are very proud of. The centre was set up by private donations, so we don't depend on governments to tell us what to do. But this does mean that we have to raise money. We do this by hiring out our facilities for conferences during the day. And at Christmas time companies can have their parties here.

We are really pleased to host the Howard de Walden Estate Christmas party. The Estate has performed miracles. In 1997 this area wasn't half as nice as it is today – they have made amazing improvements. And through them people get to know us, because when I first came to the centre people were sometimes afraid to come in. They thought: "What is this? Is it for members only?" I want to tell people that the centre is open to everybody. We are part of the community.

My role is extremely demanding. I'm usually here from 8am until late, and I also work many weekends. I have to supervise everything and deal with the accounts and the budget. I have a small, hardworking team and we are very hands-on. For example, if the cleaner doesn't turn up you still have to ensure that the centre is clean. I'm not the type who says: "I'm the director. You do everything." If you don't do things yourself then you can't expect your colleagues to do them. I feel very strongly about that.

Marylebone has a real community and you always see the same people



in the shops. I do my food shopping at Waitrose and buy my clothes in Marylebone. I live on my own up in Hampstead Village, which is a lovely area, but I'm hardly there. I spend one quarter of the day at home sleeping – the rest of the time I'm here.

I've been a magistrate since 1995, sitting at Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court. I felt that because this country accepted me, I should give something back. It's a voluntary job – nobody forces you. For the first six months I wondered why on earth I decided to do it. I was very depressed, but then you realise that you only see a small percentage of society. And you feel that you're helping them, because you're not only sending people to prison, you're also sending them to have treatment for alcohol and drug abuse. Most of the crime is drug related, and most of the violence is alcohol related, so our role is not only to punish people, but to help them.

If I have the time, I like the theatre and the opera. Or I see my children and my grandchildren. The Hellenic Centre's trustees told me not to work so many hours. But I enjoy my job very much, even though it is very demanding. There are deadlines every day. We are a very busy place. But that is fine – I am something of a workaholic