

## CULTURE CLUB

AGATHA KALISPERAS

The director of the Hellenic Centre was awarded the British Empire Medal in this year's honours list. She talks about life in the UK centre for Hellenism

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Getting the British Empire Medal was a surprise, it was a real shock when I opened the letter. I have never even considered something like that happening to me. On the citation it says the award was for services to the Greek community in London. But I consider it recognition for the work the whole centre has done for all communities over the years and it is lovely to see it recognised by other people.

The Hellenic Centre opened in 1994 as a place in London where Greeks and Greek Cypriots of the diaspora could gather. There were many small community organisations, but they were operating

out of people's houses and borrowed spaces. The idea for the centre was to be a space for all of them—a place where they could promote their Hellenic culture, both artistic and academic, talk about what was going on at home, but also, very importantly, engage with people in the UK who love Hellenic culture.

I was not involved from the beginning. I first arrived as a volunteer and had been working at the centre for a couple of years when the then director left, in 1997. The board asked if I would take the role for six months to help them out. I only agreed to do it for a limited period, but as you can see I am still here.

From the beginning, the idea was for this to be an inclusive institution for the whole community, and that remains central to what we do today. So for example, we teach modern Greek languages and at last count we had students from more than 40 ethnic backgrounds. While we promote Hellenism, we engage with all cultures and this is something that is very important to me.

As the director, I am responsible for implementing the cultural

programme, running and maintaining the building and managing the conference facilities. Of course I do not do this all myself; I have a wonderful and dedicated team working with me.

This is a charitable trust, and as part of the role I meet with the trustees and the executive board—who all volunteer their time freely—four or five times a year to discuss the cultural programme and make strategic decisions about the centre.

The majority of the projects start as proposals from artists and societies, but as a board we do have some ideas for projects we want to pursue. We have a very varied offering of lectures, musical events, readings and exhibitions. A lot of our exhibitions and lectures are by people who are not of Hellenic extraction and when this is the case, there needs to be an aspect of Hellenism to what they are proposing. If they are from the Hellenic world, their work and perspective on the subjects from the wider world is always welcome.

We put on more than 70 events last year, which is a very busy schedule considering we do not run cultural events all

year round—though our facilities are available for hire. We roughly follow the academic year for events like these.

In the last few years it has not been possible to ignore the financial problems that have hit Greece. We all have relatives in Greece and Cyprus and it is very sad when you hear what life is now like for some of them. Of course getting enough food to people is the priority, but it is also very important to maintain the country's cultural traditions—they cannot be thrown away to save money. We must allow people to express themselves and remember to celebrate the best things about Greek culture, because that is how a country comes through times like this. We are trying to help in whatever ways we can. For example, we have raised some money for a charity that supplies heating fuel for schools that were having to close.

My role has evolved as the centre has become better-known. We have also built many personal and cultural links over the years and there is more interaction with communities further afield, including some with Greece and Cyprus. We do occasionally get radio stations from both countries calling to interview us about the centre's activities. All of these links feed directly into what we do here, and it means that I deal with a wider variety of people than when I started. So in my view, the role has changed for the better.

The biggest challenge is fundraising. We are not affiliated to the national governments of Greece