



## Greek American Students Discover Greece

The American College of Greece and National Hellenic Society sponsored 15 students to spend two weeks in Greece on a birthright trip to discover their heritage

“Modern, just like ancient Greece, has unique importance for everyone who is trying to find himself,” wrote the great American novelist Henry Miller.

For a group of 15 Greek American students, most of whom had never visited Greece before, it was an opportunity to discover their heritage and roots by experiencing Greece firsthand. The students came from all over the U.S. – from California to Texas to North Carolina – to visit a range of historical sites and popular vacation spots across Greece.

“Standing right at the center of the universe, the Omphalos Stone, which according to Greek Mythology is the point where the two eagles sent by Zeus met, wasn’t enough to make the Heritage Greece trip to Delphi exciting. Being there with fifteen Greek-American students was,” said American College of Greece student Andreas Aktoudianakis. “There we were: a group of young people with a shared history – Greece – that we were exploring together.”

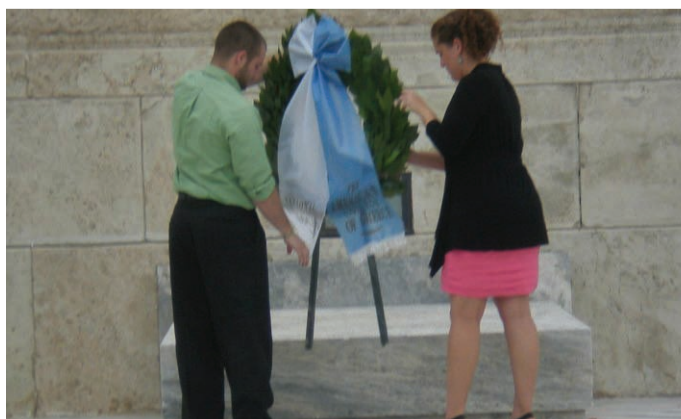
Along with other Greek students, Heritage Greece participant An-

dreas Aktoudianakis showed the Greek American students around the country of their origin as they learned about their heritage, about contemporary Greece and about each other. Heritage Greece is a free, two-week cultural immersion trip made possible by a grant of the National Hellenic Society in partnership with the American College of Greece. The peer group trip was designed to instill a strong sense of identity and connection between student participants and their Greek heritage.

The trip began with an orientation in New York, where the students were met by David Horner, president of the American College of Greece. Together the students flew to Greece, where they spent a few days in Mykonos before their Greek language, art and history classes began at the American College of Greece in Athens.

Trip highlights included visits to Delos, Delphi, Sounion and the Acropolis. The students met with Hieronymous II, Archbishop of Athens and all of Greece, who blessed each student participant and gave them a gift of a bible and gold Cross. Students met with





Greece's Deputy Foreign Minister, Spyros Kouvelis, which was televised on ERT1 in Greece and around the world.

At the Deputy Minister's office, Kouvelis said, "It's important for Greece and the Greeks of the Diaspora to reconnect with the motherland, its cultural heritage and values." Kouvelis underlined that the future depends on the young people who are going to become the new leaders of tomorrow and added that the Greek Diaspora is one of the government's big concerns in its political agenda.

The students were granted a rare exception typically reserved for visiting official dignitaries: laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Athens in remembrance of for those who fought for their freedom – a Greek ideal and value.

Activities also included a night out in Glyfada's top nightclubs to see pop star Despina Vandi, a trip to one of Greece's best wineries, and classes at several modern museums including the Cycladic Mu-

seum of Art and new Acropolis Museum. Each student received three college credits they can apply toward fulfilling their degree requirements.

The lucky 15 Greek American students were selected from a group of more than 70 applicants. They all attend top universities and have an average GPA of 3.7. Few had ever visited Greece before the sponsored trip, though many plan to return.

Students kept an online blog documenting their travels, photos and what they learned.

"Instant connections," wrote one student on the blog. "We have been together on this journey for only seven days now, and surprisingly I feel like we have known one another for much longer. Though we have all traveled from different states, even Alaska, we have a common thread that binds us together, our Greek heritage. Heritage – a heavy word with great meaning to us all."