2023 KOY Acceptance Speech - Marilyn Tsolakis

It is a great honour to be here tonight amongst family and friends to receive the Kastellorizian of the Year Award for 2023. And of course it all starts with Kastellorizo, the island where my parents Michael Tsolakis and Lola Simeon were born. Many of the initiatives and projects I was asked to implement for FoK inspired me to draw on the knowledge, the stories and experiences of my family and the wider Kastellorizian community. I lived it, grew up with it and the storytelling enriched me in ways that helped me to understand where we came from and to be proud of it. It is because of my parents that the love of my Kastellorizian heritage runs through my veins and therefore, I would like to acknowledge and honour them tonight, especially since they recently passed away. Their spirit is with me tonight. Their role modelling for their commitment and service to the Castellorizian Association of WA gave me the impetus to build on their contributions. My father was president and vice president of the Castellorizian Association of Western Australia in the 80s, a trustee as well as being made an honorary life member. He was also sent to an auction to purchase the property that has now become our Castellorizian home in Perth which many of you have visited. My mum was a great support. Lola was also on the committee and Ladie's Auxiliary and she was also made an honorary life member. So you can see that my brothers and I have had total immersion in all things Kastellorizian.

Through my role as Coordinator of FoK, I have been given the opportunity to set up and develop educational, cultural and environmental projects. This award is an acknowledgement of *Friends of Kastellorizo's* success and I want to thank the founding sponsors, the late George Theo Kailis, Nick Mitaros and Peter Satouris who put in seed funding to establish our non-profit organisation. They had faith in my ability to make these projects happen for the betterment of the island. I have worked enthusiastically for 15 years to promote our Kastellorizian heritage.

So how did it all begin? There was a World Wide Kastellorizian Symposium on the island in 2007 and two of the Directors, Nick Mitaros and George Theo Kailis, realised that the Australian diaspora needed to get involved. That's when I was approached to make many of the ideas come to fruition and to give back to the island of our forebears, which is our motto. I was also at a point in my life where I had been teaching English and Literature for over 30 years, as well as being Head of English at MLC Perth for 14 years and was considering a lifestyle change with lots of travel added into the mix.

And so, in 2008 *Friends of Kastellorizo* was born, formerly known as Australian Friends of Kastellorizo.

My profession as an English and Literature teacher gave me the language skills to write and speak in ways that have contributed to projects such as the **illustrated bi-lingual book, *Kastellorizo: My Odyssey*,** where I created the voice of the land that tells the history of Kastellorizo. After all, who else has been there since 9th century BC; only the land. The island becomes the character or the voice in the book. I co-authored it with Andrew Johnstone and worked with an artist, Dr Platon Alexiou from Athens. I tested the success of this book with students in schools before it went to print. Copies were given to students at the school to learn about their island history. And of course, children in the diaspora also learned about

their rich history. Of course, the book is sold out. After that, there was the book launch and art exhibition to organise.

Working with teenagers in education also enabled me to organise **Youth Festivals** on the island and of course it all starts with a Tavli (backgammon) tournament, doesn't it, especially if you're Greek. We also had poetry workshops, Greek dancing lessons and tour of the army barracks. They also were part of the Clean Up Kastellorizo Day. It was a wonderful experiment where we witnessed great interactions between the local and Australian children. Connections were made and friendships formed.

Another inspiring project for me was to set up the **Student Exchange Program** where we alternated by taking Australian students to Kastellorizo and the following year, we would bring students from the island to Australia. I applied for funding from various sources; however, the Perth City Council, was our major sponsor, because of our sister city relationship. And of course, Melbourne you got involved hosting students and that's why they got to see your beautiful city. People such as Dr George Stabelos, Christina Mc Auliffe, Dr Nick and Anne Lolatgis, Gary and Anna Redlich and Kevin and Barbara Mangos hosted students and made it possible for Kazzie kids to see Melbourne. Thank you. I worked with the Headmistress of Santrapeia School, Betty Mouzak, who organised with her staff lessons in Chemistry, Robotics, physical education. Students visited the museum, walked the mountains, went on historical walks using FoK Walking Guide, visited the grotto and island of Rho. Students were shown how to make katoumari and nifi's halva by a local woman, Despina Misomike (nee Matsos). They were invited into her traditional Kastellorizian home and while they were flipping the katoumari, they learned some history through her personal story about hardships and sorrow on the island. It was very important for teenagers from Australia who never experienced hard times, to hear what is was like. They were very moved. She was a great storyteller.

The impact this program had on Australian students was keenly felt as I witnessed an awakening of their Kastellorizian identity. The value of this program is beautifully expressed in the following way by one of our 15 year old participants in 2015.

Stories are just stories, until you have witnessed them in some way yourself. […] the island had turned into something more than just a holiday destination. It had always been my family's history, but now it had finally become my history. […] Australia will always be my birth place, but Kastellorizo will always be my home. (Maraya Takoniatis).

To hear these words from a 3rd generation Kastellorizian teenager demonstrates the value of this program to connect them to their heritage. My driving force was not only my love of igniting this flame in my students, but imagining if only my father and mother were given this opportunity. In the 1920s and 30s this would not have been possible. COVID disrupted this program in 2020, as well as the Royal Commission recommendations on Mandatory Reporting on students that made it difficult to continue.

Recently, I have been focusing on our publications, *Filia*, our monthly eNews and updating our website. I want to thank another Director, who is very well known to all of us, Nick Pappas, who I refer to for historical accuracy. He willingly contributes articles for *Filia* that

adds to the cultural knowledge of our island. *Friends of Kastellorizo* also received an award for *Filia* from the Megisti Municipality in 2012.

We are also trying to keep FoK relevant to our younger generation of Kastellorizians by using social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to keep us all connected.

There are other projects such as the Empire Patrol Sculpture to commemorate the loss of 33 lives that stands at St George of the Well Square; the restoration of the Hammam- the Turkish baths.

This pioneering work has been acknowledged by one of my referees, Dr Vassiliki Chryssanthopoulou, in her academic publications and with her students. She is an Associate Professor at the University of Athens who specialises in Diaspora Studies and completed her thesis on Kastellorizians in the diaspora in the 80s. Vassiliki recognises the valuable and multi-faceted work I have been doing for Kastellorizo and the diaspora over a long period of time, just as Florence Livery, who nominated me for the award. I would like to acknowledge Florence and to thank her. Florence recognises the volume of work that was capturing the attention of many people and she was meticulous in getting all the details accurately. It is heartening to be receiving so many congratulatory messages that have endorsed my selection. I am actually overwhelmed and humbled.

I also want to thank the Kastellorizian Association of Victoria for having the vision to establish this award and for bringing me to Melbourne to accept it. You are to be congratulated for being the first state based association to have such foresight.

Also many thanks to my brother, Ian, for making a lightning dash from Perth to be with me and to represent my family. Also thanks to Allan Cresswell, a former Kastellorizian of the Year, for making the effort to come from Perth. I also have cousins from Melbourne, Maria and Nick Georgoulas. Maria's mother, Nina Mangos, is my mother's first cousin. Also thanks to Mary-Anne Simeon and her son Nic originally from Perth, but now living in Melbourne. I have made many connections from Kastellorizo, and to see all of you here tonight is wonderful. Thank you for being here.

In conclusion, what brings us all here tonight is Kastellorizo and the contributions we make to the island and the diaspora. Our Kastellorizian communities foster our cultural heritage as we work together to keep our cultural identity close to our hearts and to pass on to future generations. Long may that live into the future. And that fills my heart with joy and makes all that we do worthwhile**.**

I want to finish with this image that I'm sure you can all relate to. Every time the boat enters that majestic harbour and you see the colourful neo-classical houses, your heart and eyes fill with emotion, as you visualise your parents and grandparents in their youth playing on the limani. You look for your family homes and feel that this is where it all started and you walk in their footsteps. We come full circle as we connect with where we all began. And with another conversation over a cup of coffee at the limani, we discover yet another relative on our family tree.