

Serious Fun and Games: AHEPA's Third Annual Hellenic History Tournament

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New York.- By Vicki James Yiannias

A flawless combination: encouraging Greek American youth to know the history of their ancestors while providing a great, stimulating day for bonding with other kids. The Annual Hellenic History Tournament, born of Nicholas Nikas' strong desire to preserve a bit of Hellenic consciousness in our youth for as long in the future as possible, even as they lose the ability to speak Greek, is an idea with big potential.



All contestants with John Grossomanides at left and Emmanuel Moshovos at right.

Statements from enthusiastic participants (and members of the winning team of the tournament) are a case in point. High school senior, Jordan Augustinos: "I enjoyed gaining new knowledge about our long Greek history and culture in preparation for the competition, as well as competing alongside my teammates". High school sophomore, Kapetanopoulos: "It was great learning about my heritage and I enjoyed working with my friends from church". High school sophomore, Alexandra Walsh: "The tournament was a great chance for me and my friends to learn about our history and culture in a team setting." Alexandra gives a lot of credit for her success in the tournament to her study of Ancient Greek, a class taught by Mr. Mark Pearsall at Glastonbury High School.

Nikas, who is Supreme Governor of New England and Chairman of the tournament, is busy publicizing the tournament to AHEPA chapters in Massachusetts and beyond. He hopes that as more AHEPA districts decide to hold their own tournaments around the country, there will come a time to hold a national competition to determine the overall winners.

Nikas, a member of Archangels Greek Orthodox Church of Stamford, CT., and resident of Old Greenwich, CT., created the Hellenic History Tournament three years ago when he was District Governor. The first tournament was held in Norwich Free Academy in 2009.

The 3rd Annual Hellenic History Tournament was held on Saturday, October 29, 2011, at the facilities of St Barbara Greek Orthodox Church in Orange, CT. The tournament was sponsored by the chapters of Yankee District #7 (Connecticut and Rhode Island) of the Order of AHEPA and hosted by the New Haven chapter and the St. Barbara community under the leadership of AHEPAN Tom Tambis. The Supreme President of the Order, Dr. John Grossomanides, was in attendance and took an active part in the proceedings, as did District Governor Emmanuel Moshovos."

Some of the tournament's captivating team names—historical or imaginatively whimsical (and amusing)—show that in all cases, the kids got into the spirit and put thought into them: They are: the Cataphracts (from kataphraktos, “clothed in full armor”), Lacedaemonian Hoplites, Athena's Owls, Olympians, History Hunters, Demi-Gods, Greek Kouklas, Byzantine Beasts, and Herodotus.

Noting that the competition is a single elimination tournament, also known as “sudden death”, Mr. Nikas explained to the GN how the tournament works.

Teams comprised of three high school students each compete with each other, on how well they know the millennia-long history of the Hellenes by answering multiple-choice questions. After every match, the losing team drops out, while the winning team goes on to compete in the next round with another winning team. Members of the team that wins the final match receive a trophy (The Hellenic History Trophy) and \$1,000 each. The second place winners each get \$500.

Who qualifies: Any student who is in grades 8-12 during the 2010-2011 academic year, is sponsored by selected AHEPA chapters in NJ, NY, CT, RI, or MA, and who either knows or wants to learn something about the 3,500 year history of the Hellenes (Greek speakers).

The tournament questions are based on *Hellenika: Heritage and History*, a beautiful book written by Peter Limber and provided to the participants by Dr. George Melikokis, Principal of St. Demetrios Day School in Jamaica, Queens, to study over the summer. Complete with colorful maps and illustrations of the Mediterranean region, *Hellenika* covers the entire sweep of Greek history, showing migrations of various peoples over time.

Chairman Nikas talked about this year's tournament, beginning with how the date was chosen. “October 29 had been chosen back in March as the best time to hold this year's tournament. It was going to be a glorious New England fall day, with mild temperatures and the sun shining on fiery orange and red maple leaves.” The day before, the picture looked bleaker, with snow in the forecast for Saturday night, but because the event was scheduled to end in the late afternoon, Nikas and Governor Moshovos decided to proceed with the plan.

By 11:30 am on Saturday, the spacious hall of St. Barbara was full of participating students, parents and volunteers who run the tournament, says Nikas, and after a brief lunch, AHEPA Supreme President John Grossomanides handed each student a certificate of participation and posed with all of them for a group photograph along with Governor Moshovos.

“I explained the rules of engagement, and by 12:30 pm the first of four rounds of competition had started. Unfortunately, so had the heavy snowstorm. Even though the students seemed focused on the competition, there was an undercurrent of anxiety caused by the desire to finish as quickly as possible and start on the long way home through the slush,” Nikas recalls. “The matches were run by computers, but the computers were controlled by human moderators who were equally concerned about the drive home.”

For the first time in the three-year history of the tournament, procedural missteps caused a couple of disputes, which were settled quickly by Chairman Nikas. AHEPA volunteer Greg Stamos, an attorney who witnessed the disputes, quickly came up with a protocol for handling appeals, for use in future tournaments.

Nikas explains that sixteen teams of three high school students each (48 students) had originally signed up to compete for the \$4,500 in prizes. The AHEPA chapters sponsoring teams this year were Waterbury, Hartford, Bridgeport, Danbury, New Haven, Stamford, Norwich and New Britain (all from Connecticut), Newport, RI, and guest chapters from Boston, MA, and New Rochelle, NY. By tournament day, three teams had dropped out and some teams competed with fewer than the original three students. Still, 13 matches in four rounds were needed to determine the winners.

First prize (\$1000 each) was won by the Cataphracts from Hartford, Jordan Augustinos, Elias Kapetanopoulos and Alexandra Walsh (all active members of the St. George Hartford GOYA). Second prize (\$500 each) went to Daniel Hawkins, Nicholas Manos and Ryan Vecchitto, a team sponsored by the New Britain Daughters of Penelope.

Despite the adverse weather, there were numerous expressions of appreciation from the attendees, says Nikas, noting three that stand out in his memory: “It is a memory I will cherish for a very long time”; “We had a great time! Please have it again”; and “A superlative event! One our District should be, and is, very proud of”.