

Opa! Young Greeks preserve culture through traditional dance

By: Carmel Delshad

TARPON SPRINGS—Twenty-one year-old Natalie Abdulkarim stepped out of her car and into her shiny black dancing shoes.

The University of South Florida student was not attending a weekly ballet class or a hip-hop dance lesson; she was headed to something a bit more unorthodox. Levendia, a traditional Greek dancing troupe based in Tarpon Springs, is comprised of students much like Abdulkarim who feel the desire to keep a tie to their Greek heritage through dance.

“I have a very strong attachment to my Greek culture and this is just another way for me to keep it strong and keep in contact with it,” said Abdulkarim as she stepped into position.

Instructor Maria Kouskoutis has been dancing professionally for 30 years. Teaching the younger generation of their heritage through dance has always been a passion for Kouskoutis.

“Our mission in forming this group was basically to preserve, promote and perpetuate our Greek culture,” Kouskoutis said.

Preservation, promotion and perpetuation certainly exist in Levendia, according to Abdulkarim. For her, the network of performers provides a foundation for a cultural dialogue between teens and children.

“It is so important to set an example for the younger kids and it gives us something to look forward to,” said Abdulkarim.

Greek dancing encompasses many forms and techniques. The most common formation involves a long line of dancers all holding hands, called the *Syrto*. Other variations of dance are specific to each area of Greece.

A dance style often has the same name as its originating village or town, with the exception of *panhellenic* dances, which are performed in all of Greece. The *Hassapiko* is a prime example of this. Participants link his/her arms to a neighboring shoulder and move step-by-step to varying dance beats counter-clockwise.

Abdulkarim notes that in competitions, dancers are required to sing along with each song, a testament of the skill and concentration of each dance troupe.

“Singing is very important also because the songs tell a story, which are then passed from generation to generation. Not everyone knew how to read or write in the past, so this was just another way to preserve our culture and customs in a way that is relatable to all,” said Kouskoutis.

Traditionally, men lead the line and can improvise steps separate from the other dancers.

Michael Kontodiakos, 15, views dancing as a way to connect with his family’s past.

“Dancing is traditional and it is a fun way for me to connect to my culture.

My father was always good at dancing, so I picked it up easily. My parents never forced me to start, I felt the need to begin on my own,” said Kontodiakos.

“Dancing is still done in villages and gatherings. People from the same region will do these traditional

dances at weddings and parties,” said Kouskoutis.

Kontodiakos did not want to miss such opportunities because he did not know the customs of his native land.

“Traditions are so important. This just keeps them going, with family and friends and eventually my kids,” said Kontodiakos.

Abdulkarim remembers joining Levendia eight years ago after moving from Greece to Tampa.

“The best thing about being a part of this great dance team is the relationships that are formed. I came here and I did not know anyone outside my family. By joining Levendia, I have made so many lifelong friends. Every day is fun and it just brings me closer to home and my traditional roots,” said Abdulkarim.

“Not only do we dance here, we also learn about the customs, why we do this dance, when this dance is performed, etcetera. From there we parlay into faith, which is very much intertwined with the culture. There is always a lesson learned here, and dancing is only the beginning of it,” Kouskoutis said.