

**Acceptance Speech for the
2010 Access to Learning Award of the Gates Foundation**

Mr. Ioannis Trohopoulos
Director, Veria Public Library
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Gothenburg, Sweden

Mrs. President of IFLA, Director of “Global Libraries” program distinguished guests,

I am humbled for the great distinction bestowed on a small library in a small town in Macedonia, in a small country like Greece. I will not dwell on the work that the Gates Foundation considered before awarding the Veria Public Library this prestigious award. I assume the DVD you have seen has done that, but it is a welcome surprise and a big honor to us. I do hope you feel that our library deserves this prestigious award, even though there are so many others who qualified as well as us.

We are thankful and grateful for the honor, and I promise you that we will live up to the responsibilities that go with such a global award.

Before I go any further let me warn you. You see I am a boring speaker. One of my favorite essays is that of Joseph Brodsky’s “*In Praise of Boredom*”¹. I am afraid boredom may slip into the room ruining what I have **prepared with great care and concern**. I have the dubious honor of my extraordinary record, which probably qualifies me for the “Guinness book of records” for the number of places at which I have been invited to speak **once only**. I beg your tolerance and patience in the wonderful journey from Veria in the South to Gothenburg here in the North.

I will limit wish list of things to do after receiving this awesome award to three (3) to spare you boredom:

First, I want to see my library continue being a model, a center of excellence for cultural and educational institutions in Greece but also for the greater area of the Balkans. An organization which will develop partnerships and synergies not only at a local level but also with centres of excellence around the world. Transforming Veria into a vibrant and creative community: this is what I would love to see and this is what this award allows me **to dream of**. Thank you for the **DREAM**, Gates Foundation

Second, I want to see cultural leadership in our sector. There are plenty of capable political and economic leaders, but libraries like ours need to focus on creating the

¹ Brodsky, Joseph (1997), *Grief and reason: essays*. Farrar, Straus Giroux, pp. 104-114.

environment to nurture cultural leadership, something that is often neglected by the political and economic leaders in our countries.

Third, I would like to see Greek libraries up at the front of the agenda of the central government and of local authorities. Now it is time to link library services to national priorities and to big issues like social cohesion, digital inclusion, and cultural and educational development. I hope that the impact of this award is a catalyst for greater development on the national scale for libraries as a place of innovation and cultural leadership.

Being philosophical in my wish list as the director of the Veria Library is perhaps due to reaching the age of 50 years. Let me refer you to Plato's "*Republic*" where Plato states succinctly the following:

*"and when they [citizens] have reached 50 years of age ... they will have made philosophy their chief pursuit, and, when their turn comes, they will also toil at politics and rule for the public good, not as though they were performing some heroic action, but simply as a matter of duty"*².

There are many people and institutions that have contributed to the success of the Veria Library. The list is too long, so I have limited the list, and will like to just mention two (2) examples of continuous devotion to innovation and creativity.

One is the Helsinki City Library and Aarhus Public Library and their leaders, Maija Berndtson and Rolf Hapel, respectively. I met them a long time ago and have worked with them on several projects. They have become *-for various and different reasons-* a unique source of inspiration and strength for me personally as well as for our Veria library.

I extend my gratitude to Professor Richard Hartley, director of the Institute for Humanities and Social Science Research, at Manchester Metropolitan University. It was exactly 20 years ago when I presented him in one page my plan for developing a modern library service in Greece. He mentored me, and so here I am receiving the ***Access To Learning Award for 2010***. It has been a long journey, very adventurous with a triumph at the end. Thank you, Richard.

² Plato, *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, available on <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>, accessed on August 11, 2010 (Book VII, 540b)

Before I go any further let me point out some myths that this award to the Veria Library will fortuitously dispel:

First myth: people living in southern countries of Europe do not read so much, do not use libraries, and so do not need libraries. **FALSE**. The people of Veria proved that Greeks love reading, use libraries regularly and actually need them more in times of crisis such as today. Even though people in the South use informal networks to communicate to seek solutions to their problems, public libraries open up new horizons without eliminating traditions. Libraries are placed at the heart of their communities as a new resource. This award testifies that people need libraries, which are vibrant, flexible organizations that listen to the needs of the community, and provide for those needs.

Second myth: a national program is prerequisite to the development of a library of high standard. Actually what we may see in the future as a result of the impact of this award is probably the opposite, that is projects of smaller scale and size becoming a source of drastic changes in national level. The use of new technologies in creative and innovative ways can certainly overcome barriers based on the old traditional structure. Let us face it. Small industries are replacing huge businesses all over the world. Small libraries too can become the spring board for recovery in our country. Look how micro-lending has challenged the domination of the big banks.

Third myth: libraries need a state controlled strategy for growth. Our achievement shows that at the heart of Library's role are the needs of the local community. This is where we get the strength and power to fight and continue to deliver services of value to the public. By that I do not want of course to undermine the duty of the state or of public bodies to create the framework and ensure the development of library services across a country.

Thank you Gates foundation for dispelling these myths by recognising a small library like ours a bit like the Noble prize, if I may be so blasphemous for a moment, going to micro lending institution in Bangladesh a few years ago. It will be great if this recognition of a small library will inspire library directors to **think big** even when they serve small libraries in small communities.

The story of Veria Central Public Library is a tale of realistic goals and mission, **constant experimentation, collaboration** with other libraries and experts, and of a **relentless investment in digital innovation and technologies**. Our inspired staff and the motivation of our community leaders allowed the library to succeed locally and also impact other libraries in Greece and elsewhere.

Our motto “*a smart library, an open approach*” is changing the perception that most Greek people have about the modern public library.

A few years ago Veria Library took a strategic decision to implement more services for young children and parents focusing on imparting creativity via innovation.

In 2009, we took a big step forward by opening [The Magic Boxes](#), a space for children to experiment and develop life-long skills and digital competencies. The main innovation in this pioneering program lies in the adoption of the state-of-the-art technologies to stimulate child creativity and the employment of qualified professionals and volunteers in children education. Today, regional cultural organizations have embraced the Magic Boxes idea and support the expansion of programs to reach young citizens. The plan is to transform gradually the whole building, our future library, into a *Magic Box*. My vision for the coming years is this: Veria, my city, being established not only as the city of books, something which may already be the case, but as the city of children.

The mission and vision of the Veria Central Public Library are: Serve the un-served, Build partnerships, Create experiences and expectations. To accomplish these, we must remain relevant to the community and care about what people think about our services and respond positively to their demands.

We feel that our libraries must not be only a place, where someone can borrow a book or find an answer to a query, but also a place where citizens can expand their horizons to the world beyond and to the opportunities of innovation in a digital age.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What has happened during the last six (6) months in my country Greece has been very damaging to our dignity. Greece, the cradle of western culture and civilization is being portrayed as a country where people do not care. I am here to assure you that in my country there are still many hard working people, skillful, talented, with respect and courage, eager to learn, to share, and to create. For those people in Greece but also around the world I am reading this poem by one of our

Greek poets Ms. Kiki Dimoula³. It might be *all Greek to you*, but I can assure you it is revealing about the Veria Library journey and most inspiring to me in my own journey to this point:

ΑΠΟ ΤΗΝ ΕΛΠΙΔΑ III

Δεν το αποκλείω
Όσα νόμισα ότι μπορώ να ονειρευτώ
Σ'αυτήν να τα οφείλω

Αλλά εν γνώσει μου τουλάχιστον
Δεν καταδέχτηκα τη βοήθειά της

εκτός εάν το ίδιο το όνειρο
πήρε την ταπεινωτική πρωτοβουλία

γενικά δε ζητώ

μόνο στην προσευχή μου επιτρέπω
κάθε τόσο κάτι να χρειάζεται

γιατί ξέρω πώς λαχανιάζει στον ανήφορο
και παραιτείται γρήγορα από την κορυφή

εγώ η ίδια συνήθως δε ζητώ
ούτε και παίρνω τίποτα

απ' όσα φορτικά επιμένει
να δίνει η ελπίδα
εκτός αν μου δώσει
κανένα κλειδί

τότε ναι, ταπεινώνομαι
χωρίς ντροπή το αρπάζω

ό,τι κλειδί και να 'ναι αυτό

³ Dimoula, Kiki (2010), *Evretra*, Athens, Ikaros Publ. (in Greek)

και άλλης πόρτας, ξένης να'ναι
το αρπάζω

παρά να μείνω έξω

I want to thank Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for giving back to the citizens of Veria and to all Greeks dignity and pride but just as important, giving us hope by recognizing our dedication and our devotion to work.

On behalf of my staff I also want to reassure the Foundation and all of you, and my people in Greece, that we will continue our work with more passion and enthusiasm, despite the problems and challenges we face.

Thank you!