

NEWS AND VIEWS

Return from the Peleponese

Danai Papadatou, Professor of Psychology at Athens University, is in the front line of support to school-teachers in Greece trying to help families traumatised by the massive fires. She has sent us this report on her recent work there with Merimna (Care), the non-profit organisation she founded for the care of children and families facing illness and death. As usual in disaster areas there are multiple losses: of lives, homes, olive trees and much else and supporters have to deal with all of these losses, not just bereavements. Her report takes on fresh relevance in the wake of the recent fires in California. CMP

It is only last night that we returned from the Peloponnese, exhausted, filled with pain over the silent mourning of people and the haunting sight of burned villages and huge spaces of land, but also content to have achieved our goal. Our team had met approximately 500 teachers (in separate groups) who work in elementary and high schools in the affected areas. We gave three main lectures about children's responses in disaster situations and how to support them when they grieve losses and cope with the traumatic effects of such experiences, and helped educators to face the first day in class and build upon students' resilience.

We had group discussions with some educators in badly burned areas, distributed information material and visited the burned areas and the schools worst affected by the fires. These visits were heartbreaking: the pain of people is immense, still mute, the catastrophe enormous. Driving through vast burned areas of the Peleponese I ached, ached, ached. The earth is totally black and the people are in silent mourning.

At least our interventions were warmly welcomed by educators, schools, and officials who said they had benefited from the information we offered, and asked for ongoing support. Our society cannot assume alone the responsibility for a long-term intervention in this vast area. It's

huge. There are several hundred schools, and less than 10 local psychologists! These psychologists also asked for our help and they are coming to Athens next week for more intense training from us.

This coming Sunday we have national elections, and when we see who is in key education positions we can discuss ideas for a comprehensive, long term-plan of intervention for schools. I only hope that the Ministry of Education will seriously consider a major project and will not limit itself to our current intervention, which was important as immediate help but minimal in comparison with what will be needed in the years to come.

The problems in the burned areas are enormous, not only for children but also for the resident adult population. People have lost their homes, animals, olive trees and fields, and are left with nothing. Some of them had heart-rending stories about particular olive trees that had been planted by their grandparents or parents, or by themselves when their children were born, and they considered these trees to be their offsprings' inheritance. There is a long family history associated with their earth and trees. They dread the period of olive harvest (November to January) which will leave them jobless, with no goal, and will sink their villages into total inactivity and depression.

Our team of six colleagues worked very well together, and this facilitated the entire process. I took them to a beautiful green village nearby on Sunday and we spent a full day and night in a lovely pension, playing Scrabble and walking in the woods. It was re-energising before continuing with the rest of the visits and the lectures the following days.

Today, the first day of the school year, we supported the teachers of four siblings who burned in the fire with their mother. These children had lived in Athens and their schoolmates are deeply affected. ●

Danai Papadatou

New postgraduate certificate in working with bereaved adults

Where can UK bereavement professionals or bereavement volunteers go to build their careers? How do future leaders in the bereavement services become critical thinkers and improve their services? This

new certificate, the first of its kind in the UK, provides a critical, evidence-based study of the organisation and delivery of bereavement services for adults.

Offered jointly by St Christopher's Hospice, Help the Hospices and Sir Michael Sobell House, Oxford, and validated by Middlesex University, the programme runs part-time for one year, delivered as two modules, one in Oxford and one in London. It is tailored to colleagues from community-based voluntary organisations, bereavement personnel in hospitals, hospice and palliative care teams, researchers and academics or for those in allied services, such as police and ambulance personnel.

Course leaders are Marilyn Relf, Head of Education, Sir Michael Sobell House, Oxford and Linda McEnhill, Lecturer in Palliative Care, St Christopher's Hospice, London, with additional teaching by leading researchers, academics and practitioners in the bereavement field. Applications are now being taken for an April 2008 start. For an information pack and application form, please contact Katy Elton on 020 7520 8898, or email: k.elton@helpthehospices.org.uk ●

Anniversary history of Cruse

Dear Editor

I am writing a history of the leading UK bereavement charity, Cruse Bereavement Care, to mark its 50th anniversary in 2009. The history will illustrate the essence of Cruse's work seen through the eyes of volunteers, clients and others who have come into contact with it.

I would very much like to hear from anyone who has a story or anecdote to tell about their involvement with this organisation, or a poem about bereavement. I cannot promise to publish (anonymously unless permission has been granted) everything that is sent to me but all submissions will be carefully read and will add to the flavour of the final publication. ●

Sara Richards

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