

Maris Kayafas

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Maria Kayafas

Maria Kayafas has been the Greek dance instructor at the St. John the Divine Greek Orthodox Church in Wheeling for 25 years. She grew up in Kent, Ohio. In this interview, she talks about her family background and heritage, her experience as a Greek dancer and dance instructor, and the community at St. John the Divine.

MK: Maria Kayafas

EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

EH: So could you introduce yourself—tell me who you are, where you were born, and when you were born.

MK: Okay. I'm Maria Kayafas and I was born in Kent Ohio, I went to the Akron Enunciation Greek Orthodox Church growing up and I was born in 1964, I'm 51. Almost 52. And my mother was a Greek dance instructor in Akron, Ohio for about 25 years and my mother-in-law was a Greek dance instructor in Steubenville, Ohio for over 20 years. They both passed.

EH: What brought you to the Wheeling area?

MK: My husband's job. He graduated before me, we had been dating, and he found a job here. So now he has his own firm here. But it is a very small Greek community and that was something I had to get used to. I wasn't used to that small parish that just didn't have all the culture, so we just started things.

EH: And so at what age did you become part of the St. John's... it's St. John the Divine, right?

MK: Well we became members as soon as we came, but we were also trying to cut in time with his Steubenville parish so I was 27 and then I don't know by the time I was... no no no, I would have been 23, but by the time I was 25 we were more actively involved.

EH: And was there an existing dance troupe?

MK: No. There had been no dance troupe for 35 years and that really bothered me and I thought, well we oughta teach these kids—they have... they just didn't know how to dance. So the first year I didn't even teach routines, I just taught that group of kids how to Greek dance about 5 dances. We didn't even get into anything, you know? And the next year everyone was like "Wow, they've really improved!" and I said, well they've learned the dances, now I'm teaching routines.

EH: Yeah.

MK: But I had that group for 4 years, I told you.

EH: And how many, how many students were there initially?

MK: Initially there were only 5 and then there was a 6th kid that was like an honorary Greek—like a friend of somebody because I thought we needed 6 kids anyway to have an actual group. And it grew to be about 8. But...

EH: And could you tell me just how you learned and what kind of dance you did growing up?

MK: I don't really know the age I learned Greek dance, but we have our children dancing from the time they could walk, they're in the lines, they want to join the lines at Greek dances and things. And when I grew up there were a lot of Greek dances in the area in Akron and Cleveland. And my brothers and I would go to all of them. I mean as soon as the oldest one could drive, he took us so we went and saw other Greek friends at the diocese and... good times, you know, a lot of happy memories. My mom was the dance instructor and we performed at our festivals and she actually performed all through... people hired us, wherever. We did a lot of performances, but my group is a little different because we don't perform all year. When we had a Greek school we had a March 25th Independence Day program and I was training kids to dance for that, and then they did dance for the festival. But nowadays kids are so busy in their extracurricular activities, this really works well. The kids are very devoted for the month of July and they give it their all and they become very very close. It's a great experience for them. And then you know, they have to turn it off because they have other things starting. Starting August 1st they have their athletic responsibilities for their high schools and...

EH: Yeah, yeah.

MK: And...

EH: Do you do a specific regional style or is sort of a national?

MK: I think they're from all different islands of Greece because I'm pretty sure I cover a lot. We do 12 different dances in the oldest group. But I have the youngest group that starts at age 3. We'd start a little bit older, but the parents keep asking them to start younger so a few years back it went to 3 and they are adorable. They're from 3 to kindergarten. So they kindergarteners are there to kind of be the leaders! It's so cute! And they really learn the steps! It's so funny. But I only teach them 3 dances. They do the **Sousta**, they do a **Kalamatiano**, and they do a "**Alexandro**" (?) when we all lead. And they're 3 really easy dances and they're just adorable. And then the middle group is first grade through fifth grade. And that's a pretty nice sized group and they do probably 6 or 7 dances. So it doubles, a little over doubles. And it doubles again almost really when they get to the next age group.

EH: Wow. So how many do you have in the program right now?

MK: They'll be 66 kids dancing this year.

EH: Oh my gosh!

MK: Well there could be more, it's just that you don't ever... I mean I went through my list yesterday and there's going to be 66 this year.

EH: And so... how big is the Greek community in the area?

MK: You know, it's controversial about how many families.... I think maybe 120 families—it's not big. I grew up in a parish that was much bigger, and you know, really wealthy, and money was never an object, and I had to raise all the funds for the dancers' costumes and all the things and um, you know, every parish around here does different things, I just have my style and the way it runs and it seems to work well for this community.

5:20

EH: Mmhm. So it seems like other ethnic communities are experiencing a lot of loss and out-migration. You know, seeing the video, there's a lot of kids still dancing. So is there, do you think there's a reason that hasn't really happened in the Greek community here?

MK: Well, I just think it took a leader, because I think that there always would have been, I mean, they went 35 years also without a dance instructor. You got to have the desire. And I love kids and I love my culture and I love dance, so the three things, I guess the Lord just wanted me to do this. But it's a total pleasure for me. I mean I LOVE IT. It's very nerve racking—there's a lot of work to do. But I just love it. I have summers off 'cause I'm a teacher, so July you know, I now am devoting it to this and I'm happy to do it.

EH: Wow. Yeah, sometimes it does take just one person who says, "I'm gonna carry this on."

MK: Yeah. And in other communities, like my mother-in-law when she passed, they tried to get 7 girls to do the job of her job, 'cause nobody really wanted the responsibility all by themselves, and it ended up being a really bad decision. Cause you have a lot of rules, you know, so you keep order to the whole system, and then when there's 7 people, nobody wants to bend any rules because they feel like, I don't know why, but I told them, you know, that's why you gotta have one person because rules are there for me as guidelines, but I can bend them, so if I have a child that wants to dance with the other kids but it only in 5th grade and is supposed to be in 6th because his older brother and sisters are in the older group and he doesn't want to be in the other group any more, I just let him go! You know, anything to keep the kid. The rules can be bent.

EH: Mmhm.

MK: It's church! I mean it's not, it's not, you know...

EH: Um, so have others, have some of the kids that you've worked with, have they gone on and pursued dance or...

MK: One of the girls that's dancing there, she graduates this year, she is getting a minor in dance, but most of them just do it for fun. They're happy to know their culture, you know. Cause they can go to any Greek dance, any Greek picnic, any Greek festival and just join in and be a part of the whole scene. 'Cause most of our children don't speak Greek anymore. My Greek is pretty bad. But at least if they can dance, they can fit in with the whole culture.

EH: Yeah, yeah. It's sort of like a way to be an ambassador.

MK: Mmhm.

EH: Could you tell me a little bit about your family and where they're from and you know some of the cultural...

MK: Okay, well my dad is from Greece and came here to go to college and met my mother—it was an arranged marriage! And they were married for over 50 years.

EH: So it worked?!

MK: Mmhm. (tearing up) and I have 5 brothers and the close family... the Greek community is very into their faith too, so, couple of my brothers, well, more than a couple, a lot of my brothers became priests! (laughs)

EH: Really?

MK: And people are always asking my parents, “what was your secret?! How did you do that? None of your kids went astray! Nobody...” You know, but, they always put church first and you don't see families do that anymore. I try to talk to them about that, you put it first because if you put it 3rd, you're not gonna make it there. You know, it's just gotta be number one. And, that's what I find when I'm working with these kids—they have such great character because their parents are putting church you know, in the forefront, most of the time, and it's just a beautiful thing, 'cause they, you know, act like strong orthodox Christians and they're very welcoming because every year we get new kids. In the group.

EH: Really?

MK: Every year. Every year. There's at least 5 or 6. Sometimes it's the little kids because now they're old enough, but the others are kids whose yaias are coming to church, they haven't been coming and they went to the festival and are like, “I want to do that!”

EH: That's amazing.

MK: Yeah.

EH: So it's sort of—the dance becomes a way to foster the community.

MK: Yeah, it does.

EH: Or the other way around. Probably both.

MK: Well actually I really believe in that. Because when I started the dance group, I just saw you know, the first group was so small. And then the 2nd group started out small as well. And um, I even had a little Lebanese boy who danced because he came to the festival and was in school

with my daughter Sophia in kindergarten and he was like “I want to dance!” And I was like, well I’m not gonna get any boys here—no boys want to dance, so I said, he’s gonna be my... and he stayed in the group ‘til he graduated.

EH: Wow!

MK: Yeah. And um, his best friend, another Lebanese guy, joined the group with his sister. And that was the only boy like Ben as far as... but they just had to give a donation so they were part of the thing. But, um, I know you asked me something and I think I got off track.

EH: Oh, I was just...

MK: Oh! I just feel like it is a door to open, you know, for faith and the culture, because you know there’s a lot of different doors into the church. I just feel like, for some this is the easiest door to walk through first and then you know, the oldest group especially, we always meet in church before we go on and perform and we say a prayer and... I think for some of these kids it’s the first time they’ve been in an orthodox church.

10:32

And um, some of the kids have actually converted to orthodoxy.

EH: Wow.

MK: Yeah. So it’s a beautiful thing. Yeah.

EH: So... I asked you a little bit about how you learned.

MK: Oh yeah, so I learned as a little girl, just from going to, you know, different family functions and dances and of course I joined the dance group... I don’t know how old I was when I joined the dance group. I think I was older. And I had to go to Greek school—most kids have to go to Greek school when they’re little. All my kids had to do it too. And everybody hated Greek school, but you know, the Greek I know is probably from Greek school! And um, okay, and then you were asking me about my family.

So my mother is half-Greek, half-German.

EH: Okay.

MK: Her father was from Greece, he came to America in New York and he met his wife from Germany who also came to America for a better life and they got married and had 4 kids.

11:29

So, my mother grew up in Brooklyn, and you know, was very Greek American, like I am and um, you know, all the brothers have... married Greeks. And I married a Greek. And I think that’s

why my husband and I might be such a strong force in the community, because we both are Greek. So both 100% committed to our faith and our culture and to the perpetuation of orthodoxy and we just you know, we're on the same page always, so that really helps.

EH: Yeah.

MK: Um, most of my dancers are 50% Greek or less. But they all, once they get connected to that Greek culture that they have, they're so happy to know it. To know that part of themselves and it's just amazing.

EH: Mmmhm. Yeah. I mean I think because you know, Americans are such a combination. Like I, my grandmother is half-French, half-Belgian, and I am so strong in my French and Belgian heritage because I don't really have any other heritage that is, you know, present in my life or was present in my life.

MK: Yes!

EH: Because even though I'm an 8th this and 8th this, I'm holding on to that.

MK: Yeah!

EH: Because it's just some kind of...connection

MK: It is, it's your identity, you know, it's so much of your identity. And a lot of parents when their little boys start are like, "Well I hope he likes it, he doesn't like it." I'm like, "He'll like it." They always LOVE it! And they're cute. So one kid, I'll never forget this, he went home and he said, "Mom, now I do four sports, I do soccer, baseball, Greek dancing, and karate." It is so cute!

13:08

EH: Yeah, I mean that's unusual too but there's also a lot of athleticism in the dance.

MK: Yeah, and I told the boys, if they're athletic, they're going to be able to pick up the dances because some of them are terrified of it. Oh, "I'll never learn." And the first year, some kids don't join the group 'til they're... oldest group, then they have a lot of dances to learn all at once, so I always tell them, you know, whatever you learn by the time the festival begins, that's what you'll do, don't feel pressure. And I never you know, they get to make the choice whether they're going to do the dance or not, but I will suggest strongly... I feel like they're not ready! But it doesn't matter to me because I'm just glad they're participating and I'm not looking for the perfect uh...

EH: Right.

MK: And if you were some professional dancer and you came, you might see a lot of different things—"oh, the toes aren't always pointed right and they don't have their hands pointed, up at

the elbow at the right time,” and I’m not concerned about that at all—I just want them to have a good time. And everybody always asks me, “how do you get them to be so zealous” and like, have so much, uh, you know, it’s just a lot of zeal for their culture. And I don’t know what I do, I just know that they’re happy to be out there. And it just happens.

EH: Yeah. Do you make Greek food at home?

MK: Yes.

EH: Okay, could you tell me about that?

14:30

MK: In fact, this year at the festival, I’m doing a little show on Fridays and Saturday, with one of my friends. We’re going to do a... I think it’s at 1:30 each day. We’re going to do a little cooking show. Going to teach everybody how to make **tijopita** (?) this year—that’s like a cheese pita.

EH: Okay.

MK: But in my kitchen I have a full freezer so I don’t have to go down to the basement or anything, and because holiday usually is usually at my house and I have a huge Greek family, so I may cook for about a month, a whole month ahead of the holiday, and I just keep freezing things. And I can just whip it out and cook it up. But you know, I grew up with my mother’s Greek cooking... you know you can’t cook Greek food every day of the week because it is time consuming.

EH: Yeah.

MK: But I cook with Greek flavor all the time and I’m always making Greek salads. Cause you know, you have to have oregano and olive oil and garlic, and um, that pretty much... and lemon... that pretty much makes everything Greek. Feta cheese is always in the house, Greek olives, you know, I love cooking. And my cultural dishes.

EH: And what do you make at the festival?

MK: Well the older ladies do a lot of that now, I do help, I did a lot of that, making grape leaves because it’s a very, very time consuming thing and they need all the hands they can get, but they make um, grape leaves, they make um, **kipta**—Greek meatballs, they make um, I think... order **moussaka**—they don’t make **moussaka**, they order it from a company. They make **pastiso**, they make **souvlakia**, there’s gyros, GY-ros, and then... at the festival, for 4 days, I get there early in the morning and I make loukoumades batter, which is those little donut holes? They’re like these but they’re dipped in honey? And then you can sprinkle nuts if you want, and they’re very light and airy. And I do that ‘til... this year I’m going to do it until 1:30 ‘til the show. And we do have

an afternoon show the kids asked to do... the older kids do, at 12:00 or 12:30—I don't remember exactly, and um, yeah, so it's busy.

EH: They do a cooking show, the kids?

MK: No, they do an afternoon dance.

EH: Oh, dance.

MK: Yeah, just the oldest group, and last year they said, we want to teach the—we want to teach the... we want to have a little lesson to all the community when they come to... so we do like a 15-minute lesson and kids lead it, I don't say a thing.

EH: Wow.

MK: I love to teach the kids and I obviously can talk but I don't like to be at the mic so the band does all my announcements and there's a couple brave kids who want to teach the...

EH: So in the video when other people were joining in, was that...

MK: Oh, well that's a certain dance we do, we get people to come in and join. But that might have been! That might have been one of the shows that they did, because they did get everybody up.

EH: Okay. And what's that dance?

MK: They just teach them the basic **kalamatiano**, it's the traditional wedding dance, if you were to marry a Greek or something, you'd have to do it at a wedding. (laughs)

EH: Okay.

17:31

MK: And like everybody gets up to do it after a certain point. But it's just a 10 step dance, and you know it's pretty basic.

EH: Circle dance?

MK: Yeah, they're all circle, but they don't close the circle. There's a leader and a lot of non-Greeks don't know that and when they go to join, they go to the front. But they don't know what they're doing. But there is a leader and our leaders are really important in the shows because they cue people. In different routines and stuff like that.

EH: Do you want to show me some of the costumes?

MK: Yeah, so...

EH: I'll leave this on.

MK: So I brought these for my kids, I brought them home early, cause they have to check out their costumes after July 3rd.

EH: I have to make sure you're not going to be late. It's 1:30 though.

MK: Oh, well he's gonna call me so don't worry. And he said he might get a ride. So this is my son's costume.

18:19

EH: You know I might set this down and then take some photos.

MK: And basically there's the evzones sleeve

EH: Oh yeah.

MK: You know? And the lady that I use is from Florida. My mother in-law had used her.

EH: Do you mind if I take...

MK: 'Cause I had people from Wheeling trying to make pieces for me when the group was really small, that first group, and that was just torture. And then she hooked me up with this lady and she's a saint, and her name is **Helen Campbell Cantonis**. Anyway, she buys shirts and then she puts these sleeves on 'em!

EH: Oh wow!

MK: Yeah, and then she made the vests—I tell her what I want. Like I wanted the boys to have black vests with little pompoms and gold, and then she kind of has you know, the flexibility to do whatever she wants based on what I tell her over the phone. You know what I mean? So their costume looks like that. And then they wear a hat. They wear a Greek fisherman's hat.

EH: Oh, I actually have one of those. I don't know why I have it.

MK: Yeah! Everybody's got one of those! And the boys also wear a sash, which Helen makes too. And the little boys have smaller ones that were my original—they don't have any fringe. And they're just really—they're for the little ones. Anyway, and the boys wear black pants and black shoes.

EH: Okay.

MK: But! If I really want to get traditional—And my son is pushing me to do this, but I have to talk to the boys the first practice and see who would be willing to do it—I should have them do one performance in evzones costume tonight.

EH: What's that?

MK: And those are the costumes that the Greek soldiers wear um, guarding the palace in Greece, even to this day, and the changing of the guards and they wear these evzone pleated skirts, white tights, and they have these red shoes with a black pompom and a vest like that, the same kind of sleeved shirt, and this woman Helen said that, you know, she could send them to me, but they're very expensive. I have to decide whether the boys will actually do it. Because, the reason my son is willing to do these kinds of things is that we do take our kids to a lot of these Greek festivals and they've been to a lot of communities, so he's seen it. But some of, most of my Greek kids haven't, so they would be feeling a little... but this is what one would look like.

EH: Oh yeah!

MK: Yeah.

EH: Cool.

MK: And my mother and my dad bought my son one when he was little. And he wore it at the March 25th programs, the Independence Day programs, but anyway.

EH: Uh-huh. So where are the other festivals nearby that you go to?

MK: Oh, there's Pittsburgh, Steubenville just had there, Pittsburgh just had theirs. Uh, there's a lot of parishes in Pittsburgh there so... and I wish I went to more of them, but you just get so... Okay, and here's the intermediate's costume. And I always go to my home parish in Akron.

EH: Oh nice.

MK: It's always nice to be back. And they announced my mom last year. They have a new dance instructor and she is really got the group back, because it had dissolved too—it's sad.

EH: So your mother ran it?

MK: Yeah, for so many years. And then she didn't run it in her older years, they retired and moved away from Akron but after she left, that role, nobody took it over well. And they just didn't happen... so now this young girl that my mother taught, started the group up—they have beautiful new costumes. Oh my God, they're gorgeous! And a huge group again and they never had a big group since my mother left and they... they said something about my mom, which was nice.

EH: Oh, that's great.

22:01

MK: Yeah. Okay so the girls' costumes are a little more elaborate, a little more to them. They wear these black skirts and they hit around your calf—they're supposed to hit around your calf.

EH: Okay.

MK: And um, that's the Greek key, you'll see it on every costume. You know the Greek key.

EH: Oh yeah. Mmhm.

MK: And then they wear these little scarves around their waist.

EH: Mmhm.

MK: And I have different colors, I like to have the different colors. This is the Greek traditional apron.

EH: Oh yeah, they're beautiful.

MK: And she does the same thing, she does the...

EH: I'll get a photo of that.

MK: Anyway, I used to wash all these costumes at the end 'cause I was... I just wanted my costumes back afterward, but it got to be... the group is getting so big, I couldn't handle it, and I realized one day when I was having a nervous breakdown trying to do so many costumes that everybody was going to have to be responsible for their own.

EH: For their own costume, yeah.

MK: And they have to bring them back. Okay and then also there's a headpiece, okay? And it has little Greek coins. And you just wear it like this.

EH: Oh yeah, uh-huh.

MK: And because we have a summer festival I always, you know, try to find the lighter material, so the only double thing they're wearing is the vest. Oh my God--I forgot to get her vest (gasps)—she doesn't have a vest and I don't have a vest to show you, but they have a red vest, the girls.

EH: Okay.

MK: I better get that.

EH: Where is her vest?

MK: It's at the church, all of the costumes are at the church—there's a room for that.

EH: Okay.

MK: And, oh and then they have this beautiful Greek necklace. We have young people don't wear kind of like—they're not as fancy, they're not as expensive, but these I got at Nordstrom's, (jangles necklace) the year before last.

EH: Wow!

MK: Isn't that nice?

EH: Yeah.

MK: And now they don't have 'em anymore.

EH: And they're usually—that's how the traditional Greek looks?

MK: Yeah.

EH: But they have them at Nordstrom? (laughs)

MK: They have them at Nordstrom's for sale, and I said Oh my God! I ordered 17 of them. They really weren't enough, so I went to get more the following summer, and they didn't have anymore, but I talked to the lady the other day from Nordstrom's and she gave me a code for one that looks similar, but I'm gonna have to keep checking back. She said they have a big sale the other month but I have to check back and see if I can get it!

24:23

Yeah! I forgot the vest! Anyway, and initially I had numbered all these costumes and had them in bags according to size, but people kept switching out items. And it was so upsetting, I just couldn't take it and I thought, you know what, forget it. The last year, when everything was done, I just put them on the rack, by size from small to large and now everybody has to pick things they want, put it in the bag. And then they have to return them. They're supposed to return them in a timely manner, but I can't hold that... it's so frustrating. You know?

Anyway, here's a photo of my son doing that little... this is a... oh my God, my mind is going blank, wait a second.

It's not a **sutoy** (sp?) I'm sorry...but the dance is just guys. And they are supposed to show off and they do two by two, okay? So usually they start in a big circle and they're all on their knee, on one knee and then one guy—they decide who's gonna go—they got it all figured out. And they do their impressive little tricks. And this year we're gonna pull out something, I hope it works. With a table and everything. So we'll see.

EH: Okay. So it's often a glass and it's supposed to be ouzo?

MK: Well, he's the only one that does that, so...

EH: That's his little trick?

MK: Yeah, that's pretty hard! But um, yeah, and usually, and they pick each other up, they do all sorts of things. Now I found this, this morning, I was like "Oh I should show you!" This is my mother and this is one of the groups, the oldest group.

EH: Oh wow.

MK: And they did wear the evzones costumes. We had a couple things—we had... the girls wore those, but these skirts are just way too big. They go all the way to the floor, very full. And we had a fall festival, but this is summer, so it would be too hot. But it would be nice to have the boys in that.

EH: Oh wow!

MK: Yeah, this is like T.J. Thomas Hall. There I am with a bunch of my brothers. My mom had a dance group just with us if you think about it.

EH: Yeah, right.

MK: See, 'cause this is another costume our boys wore, they wore all black like... and the sailor hat.

EH: Oh yeah, okay.

MK: I love them in that too... but there's the evzone costume, that's my brother Pete on the end—he's a great dancer. They're all good dancers. Oh and this was a dancing pool party.

Okay, and then we used to go to fairs and stuff—and there's my mom and some of my brothers. They would pay us to perform. I have done a little bit of that here, but I try to keep it down because I just don't have the time.

EH: Right.

MK: Here's a big shot of one, two, so it's like 3 groups combined. And that's... there's my mom. And this was at a Greek Taverna in Akron that hired us to come. Get the evening started, you know?

EH: Cool!

MK: Yeah, at the festival in Akron they even have a group that sings Greek music.

27:40

EH: Yeah, so are there any musicians in the church?

MK: Um, like who play the bouzouki or something? The bouzoukis a Greek instrument. We don't have anybody who does that here. But in those communities there are.

EH: Yeah.

MK: Yeah. And we do hire the Steubenville band to come.

EH: And that's just across the river from Weirton, right?

MK: And my mother used to send us, we went to a... see they have dance um, what do you call 'em—conventions—where you learn dances? Now we have one in our diocese and I took my dancers to the first one this past year. And they had a great time.

EH: Where was that?

MK: In Pittsburgh. It was close, so I thought okay, it's affordable, we can just drive the day, we don't have to stay at the hotels and all that. 'Cause we're not—we are supporting ourselves fine, but we don't have extra money to pay for all that. But that was (pointing to photo album) a trip to Florida. There's our kids here. Even had a parade at that Florida one.

EH: Oh yeah.

MK: This is one of the conventions. The instructors. They usually come from Greece or Canada. There's my mom. There's my mom and dad together.

EH: Aw. Neat.

MK: Yeah. That's that. My mother-in-law, of course has albums and albums of... they're still at the church, though. But she did a great job with that.

The only thing my students, my dancers have to pay for is their shoes. And the boys buy their own pants. But the costumes are the church's. They pay 25 dollars their initial year and that's it—never again do they have to pay anything.

If they're nonmembers of the church, they do give a donation to the church. If they're gonna do the dance group, because they have to become kind of social members to be part of it. 'Cause that was the rule. But I extended it beyond the doors of just the kids in the church when I first started that second group because I saw that my husband and I are very active in the community and so many people would come to me and say, "I'm Greek!" And I'm like, "you're kidding! You're Greek?" They're like yeah... but you never see them around or anything, and I'm like,

“Oh my gosh, would you want to learn how to Greek dance or something?” “We would love for them to know...” “I grew up doing that” blah blah blah, so I just started grabbing all the kids and I was saying as long as you have any Greek blood in you, or you’re a member of the community—‘cause we have a lot of non-Greeks in the community—then you can be a member. And that was a rule. And the group just kept growing and growing. So it went from 6 to 66, and there was one year—a couple years there, 2012, 13, 14, I had said to the kids, that was the most I ever had.

EH: That’s amazing! That’s incredible.

MK: Yeah. Yeah and still I feel like my group is too small because I feel like there’s so many kids that we don’t reach.

EH: Yeah, yeah, but I think there’s probably something about that attitude of openness that has really helped.

MK: Mmhm.

EH: You know, and then it’s lead to other things and helped the Greek community itself.

MK: Yeah! The kids, they come together for all those practices in July and then at the end of July, they still want to see each other, so they like, come to church more, and they go to breakfast after church, and I just love it—the older kids are doing that. It makes me happy. And now we have this wonderful priest. We haven’t had a priest like this—I’ve been here for 28 years and he’s been here 2 years now, and he is the answer to prayers, I mean...he comes to all their shows and sits in the front, and just is really—oh he doesn’t, now he... I usually have to take the kids in and say their prayers in front of the—he joins us for that before we perform and um, I don’t know, he’s just so loving and he’s been so kind to all the kids and I think they feel very loved. And it’s special.

EH: That’s great.

MK: Yeah.

EH: Are there other programs that the church runs that are for kids?

MK: Well, they have Greek school.

EH: Okay.

MK: Yeah, my husband started that many, many years ago—he wasn’t a Greek instructor, but he insisted we have it ‘cause we were taking our oldest daughter Sophia to Steubenville for Greek school, and he was like “Why don’t we have our own Greek school, every church has their own Greek school!” Well finally we got somebody to run it and we’ve been through a lot of different

instructors, but, it seems like it's pretty solid right now, although my kids are too old for that now.

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And um, you know, there's a youth program. I've always been in charge of the youth program but now it's really more active because we have a wonderful priest who's very involved with it. A bunch of our kids are at church camp right now. And my daughter that is our middle child that lives here in the summer—she goes to college—she is at camp right now being a counselor.

EH: Oh cool.

MK: It's a Greek orthodox camp, so they'll Greek dance there and they'll learn a lot of their faith, so...

EH: And is that a Wheeling-based...

MK: No, it's Mercer, PA. But we are gonna have 19 people from our parish for the first time in the history of our parish go to Camp Nazareth, and I'm really, really proud of that 'cause when I started going, as a member, I'm telling you, it was only just me and my one child. Eventually we'd get a couple more, blah blah blah, the most we ever had one year was 9. But this year, with all the options of when you can go and the adults that are joining and volunteering their time, there's 19 of us. So that's huge! It's like I'm so happy!

EH: Wow—that's great!

MK: I can't tell you.

EH: That's really great. It's good to hear about a community that is thriving.

MK: Yeah!

EH: Because it seems that a lot of others here and in Weirton are struggling to maintain traditions.

MK: And for the Greek dance group, I don't know why, but the kids come. They are so—they love it. They just love it.

EH: Probably part of it is the camaraderie.

MK: Yeah, I think they love the camaraderie.

EH: Yeah, that's great. Are there other people I should talk to in the church? So, you know, dance, music, any kind of craft, or...

MK: There's Vacation Bible School. Um, and the priest's wife... Presby (sp?) Shelly—she would be a good person to talk to about that.

EH: Okay.

MK: Cause she kinda runs it. I had to run it for several years and I wasn't...

EH: Is it like a week long?

MK: No, it's like 3 or 4 days. This year it's 3 days, I always did 4. And then the 5th day was a fun day or something, but I think they're doing 3 days. But they're longer than... my days were shorter. Anyway, it's nice to see everything growing.

EH: Yeah.

MK: And of course we have a Sunday School program, we have what they call GOYA—Greek Orthodox Youth, um, of America—it's a group that every parish has. We've always had a GOYA, but it's never been active until this priest came. So it's great because he's meeting every month and it's beautiful. And um, oh, and every uh, Christmas time, we get the GOYANS all to my house and we make meals for the shut-ins from our parish and we make about 15 um, grocery bags, 2 per family, of groceries for people that need them—not necessarily from our parish.

EH: That's great.

MK: And that's a great project. And then we always have a spring Lent retreat on there which is very nice and we do, we used to do crafts... I just hate crafts, okay? (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

MK: So I said, we gotta do something useful so I decided several years ago to start doing bag lunches for the soup kitchen. So now we're up to 200 bag lunches. We make them during the Lent retreat and the kids just love it. Everybody gets involved, everybody's got a job—it's great.

EH: That's cool.

MK: Yeah, yeah, it's good.

EH: And then as far as elders in the church...

MK: A lot of the elders are in the choir, there's an elderly choir, but we do have some young ones now, thank god, because of the priest. And um, so there's a little bit of a mix there. And there's a ladies group called the Philoptochos. And I'm a member of that but, the women that are retired are very active in that and they're always baking and doing fundraising for the parish. And they give donations to the church to the Philoptochos organization to the world to you

know, help support different causes around the world. And um, I really, really respect that group. It's about you know, doing for your fellow man.

EH: Right. That's great.

MK: Yeah.

EH: Great, well thank you so much. Is there anything you want to add?

MK: Well, no. (laughs)

EH: That's totally fine!

MK: I can't think of anything else!

EH: Great, well...

MK: Practices run like 2 hours, I have the littlest group first for half an hour then the middle group for half an hour and then the oldest group always takes an hour.

EH: Uh-huh.

MK: Cause they have so many routines and dances to do.

EH: And how often do you meet during the month?

MK: Well just, they're going to get in like 7 practices before the show. And it'll be enough.

EH: Yeah, it looks like it's enough from the video.

MK: It works!

EH: Do you do a video every year?

MK: No, that was the first year.

EH: You should do it!

MK: Yeah, maybe.

EH: I think it's worth, you know, documenting... even though, you know, to someone who doesn't know it might look the same every year, but... it's really nice to have.

MK: Yeah, it's kind of expensive—I might just do it every couple years.

EH: Ah—yeah.

MK: But I don't have to hire a pro.

EH: And now you can just...

MK: I'm always trying to do whatever I can to get people involved and that boy hadn't been around for a while and I was like—now he does videos for a living, so I was like—hey!

EH: Ah, I see. Yeah. Well that's good.

MK: And he used to be in the group, so I knew that he'd enjoy it. But maybe I could have him do the younger groups this year because we only highlighted the oldest group.

EH: Yeah. There ya go.

MK: There ya go.

EH: Or, you know, your cell phone can get decent videos.

MK: Yeah that's right. (laughs)

EH: Now the gear is so affordable, so...

MK: Oh, I should probably talk to you about how we do fundraising, cause you know, a lot of my...

EH: Yeah.

MK: Okay, so we don't have a donation that comes from the church budget, to like support the dance group, so I have to think about that and I get my costumes from a lady in Florida who makes them. You know, I kind of design something in my head and tell her what I like and just over the phone we talk and she says, "okay how about this," and that's what we do. But um, you know, costumes are expensive. There's several hundred dollars in every costume.

EH: Wow.

MK: Yeah, so um, for a while there was a woman from our parish who owned a biscotti company, so she would donate biscotti packaging and we'd sell them and we'd get half of everything. And that was a huge fundraiser, and we'd do it during the festival. The dancers would be in costume and go around trying to sell them to support the troupe. And when that closed we went to a popcorn company that would make different Greek flavored popcorn and that was a big sale.

EH: Hmm!

MK: Yeah, if you... you can sell something for 5 dollars or less, you're going to be able to sell something. And because I have so many responsibilities with the Loukamades, the dance group, and now the cooking show, I didn't want to be in charge of the fundraising item also so I did my

fundraising event in the fall like before Christmas and it was a big hit. We had a... we have a lady from our parish who has a company that makes chocolates and decorated apples, you know?

EH: Yeah.

MK: You know what I mean?

EH: Mmhm.

MK: Candy apples. So, we did that and so I don't have to worry about that during the festival this time. But we raise all our own money and like I said, you have to pay—we charge 25 dollars for the first time in the program, in the group, and that's it, and um, you know, we're able to pay whatever our expenses are, because even that first dance convention I went to in Pittsburgh, it cost quite a bit of money and you know, you gotta have money to account for that. Oh! And there's one other way we make money—it's very exciting. One tradition of the Greeks is that when you're Greek dancing, people, to complement you, they throw money. So during all our performances people are throwing dollar bills, sometimes you know, people will throw 5s or whatever but, that is a big fundraiser.

EH: I wondered if you did that.

MK: Yeah, it's fun, the kids love it. They just feel so special because people think they're good enough that they're going to throw money, you know?

EH: Right, yeah.

MK: And it's just very exciting for the crowd to see. Everybody starts throwing money. (laughs)

It's exciting.

EH: (laughs) Great, well...

MK: You know, when the boys do their one on one, they... the fathers come out and throw money on top of their kids, you know.

EH: That's cute.

MK: It's great.

EH: And so the festival is the 27th through the 30th?

MK: Yes.

EH: I'm going to put it in my calendar.

MK: Okay—it's from 11 in the morning til 9 at night.

EH: Wow, okay, so there's a big window.

MK: Yeah, it makes it easier.

EH: Cool.

MK: And I'll be a messy mess when you see me during the day 'cause I'll be cooking, but then I go home and I do shower before the dancers! (laughs)

EH: Nice. Well...

MK: Nice to meet you, Emily.

EH: Yeah! I would love to come to the cooking show too cause I just cook a lot...

MK: Yeah! This will be our first year so it might be rusty, but we thought, we gotta do it.

EH: Yeah, that's really fun. Are you gonna have a little headset mic for it?

MK: No, I don't think so—I think it's gonna be like, super low-key.

EH: My friend does demos at the farmers' market and he gets to wear like a Britney Spears mic.

MK: I could try to get one!

EH: I'm gonna put it in my calendar now.

MK: So JoAnne...JoAnne. It's so funny. Ask her if her name is Joanna Gusta, or JoAnne Augusta (*Interviewer's note: another consultant in Wheeling's Greek community*). I've asked her before and I've already forgotten. Because we always say her name together—JoAnne Augusta!

EH: JoAnne Augusta?

MK: Like everyone in the community does!

EH: Oh yeah. (laughs)

MK: But she is truly the historian of the parish—she's been there so long. I mean I've only been her 28 years, but she grew up in this parish.

EH: Nice. Well, I'm looking forward to talking with her. We're meeting at the library. And I have a release form so we can use the interview in our archive.

MK: Okay. Are you gonna let me see what you actually put before...

EH: Yeah, I can send you...

41:53

END OF TAPE