



Media Contact

Tamika Tompoulidis

nhsa@nhsaofamerica.org

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NHSA Launches Inaugural West Coast Convention in L.A.

Los Angeles, CA – The National Hellenic Student Association (NHSA) of North America, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, hosted their first bi-annual convention on the West Coast in Los Angeles, CA, March 10-12, 2017. In L.A., NHSA united over 85 students and young professionals from across the U.S., Canada, and Greece for a day-long conference exploring the work of Hellenes in the fields of art and innovation. Attendees also spent time networking and bonding over several NHSA sponsored activities during the weekend convention.

The convention kicked off on Friday, March 10, at *The L.A. Hotel Downtown* where the NHSA Executive Board greeted attendees arriving throughout the day to check-in. Participants later had the opportunity to meet and network with each other during the welcome dinner at the *St. Sophia Cathedral Huffington Center* with food provided by local Greek restaurant *Papa Cristo's Greek Grill & Catering*. Friday socializing continued with an entertaining Greek Night featuring the impressive DJ Gus Sverkos.

The following morning, attendees enjoyed breakfast at the beautiful campus of the *University of California, Los Angeles* (UCLA) before the conference began. Opening remarks were offered by NHSA President, Mr. Alexander Thomopoulos, who introduced the conference theme of *Art and Innovation* and spoke about the importance of serving one's community and pursuing excellence even in anonymity. Dr. David Schaberg, dean of the College of Humanities at UCLA, welcomed attendees to Los Angeles, followed by warm regards from V. Rev. Fr. John Bakas of St. Sophia Cathedral; Hon. Gregory Karahalios, consul general of Greece in L.A.; Mr. Andreas Kyprianides, honorary consul general of Cyprus in L.A.; Dr. Jim Dimitriou, past supreme president, AHEPA; and Gov. Michael Dukakis, former governor of Massachusetts and visiting professor, UCLA. As a reminder to the audience about the importance of civic engagement, Dukakis said, "I want to see you guys deeply and actively involved in the political life in this country, and don't let anyone tell you 'you can't do it.'"

Ms. Konstantina Panagiotopoulos, NHSA vice president and conference emcee, followed with an introduction of the guest speakers. Dr. Yiannis Yortsos, dean of the Viterbi School of Engineering, USC, moderated the *Innovation and Entrepreneurship* panel that included Mr. Peter Polydor, CEO of Ergo Capital; Mr. Michalis Raptis, software engineer at Google L.A.; and Ms. Eirini Schlosser, founder of Chuz. In response to students' questions about finding success in one's field, Mr. Polydor emphasized that "talent always follows opportunity," while reflecting on his personal experience.

After the panel discussion, attendees enjoyed lunch on the campus pavilion provided by *Good Greek Grill*. Following lunch, Ms. Katerina Zacharia, professor of Classics and Architecture, Loyola Marymount University, presented her research in classics and discussed the evolution of the arts from ancient Greece through today, and the pivotal role that language has played in its portrayal and documentation through time, before moderating the *Arts* panel. Ms. Anna Giannotis, a writer and director, followed with a brief viewing of her documentary for the Greek Heritage Society of Southern California that highlights the assimilation of Greek diaspora community in California.

The conference continued with a screening of the 2015 film *Worlds Apart*, where many attendees had the unique opportunity to view the movie for the first time. After the screening, the Director of *Worlds Apart*, Mr. Christoforos Papakaliatis, and Musical Composer, Mr. Kostas Christides, had an engaging Q&A with participants about the making of the movie and its social, cultural, and artistic influence. When asked what parting advice he would like to give to the audience, Mr. Papakaliatis said, “believe in what you really want. Of course take advice, listen, read, and look, but always go with your instincts.”

Upon concluding the day-long conference, buses escorted the attendees to the Griffith Observatory to catch a glimpse of the breathtaking L.A. sunset before heading back to *The L.A. Hotel Downtown*. Saturday continued with DJ Gus Sverkos making a second appearance at Joseph’s of Hollywood, co-hosted with *Good Greek Grill*.

On Sunday, NHSA sponsored a visit to the Getty Villa to see the beautiful gardens, private collection of artifacts and replica architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. The final stop before returning to the hotel was at In-N-Out Burger, a local favorite, where everyone enjoyed lunch and exchanged contacts to keep in touch.

“Our first convention on the West-Coast was an astounding success and we are proud to have brought such influential people in their respective fields in contact with students and young professionals,” said NHSA President Alexander Thomopoulos. “NHSA received encouraging and enthusiastic feedback, and we look forward to maintaining a presence while inspiring the local HSAs and young Hellenes to become more active, which in turn would promote the Hellenic community at large.”

The NHSA Executive Board would like to thank our participants who traveled from near and far, as well as the special guests, speakers, mentors, and sponsors for continuously supporting our organization in our mission to unite the Hellenic and Cypriot diaspora through educational, professional and social platforms.

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