

My Hoosier Greek Writing Journey

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One of the greatest and most pivotal experiences of my life has been learning about, interacting with, and writing about the Greeks of Northwest Indiana. Northwest Indiana is a sprawled suburban, area just southeast of Chicago. As Chicago's urban environment changed over the years following World War II, many Greeks and Slavic immigrant groups made their way to Northwest Indiana to settle, raise their families, and work in the steel mills and oil refineries. They refer to their area as The Region.

I was born and raised in California, the San Francisco Bay Area to be exact. My family has been in California for three generations, and we have few ties to the Midwest, outside of my late grandmother who was originally from Omaha, Nebraska, and my step-grandmother who has some family in Indiana.

My writing journey began long before any visit I took to the Midwest. I always wanted to be a writer. I remember sitting in church, daydreaming about writing books and how my teachers would read them and be so proud of me. But no matter how hard I tried, I struggled to find my voice, make my stories flow, or finish my stories to the end. I was frustrated, and I had given up on any hopes of becoming a writer. I took the practical advice from those around me and decided to stick with a sales position in my family business. This was a safer approach than struggling to make it big as a writer while having a day job at Starbucks.

One summer, my family and I took a trip to Omaha to visit some relatives of my late grandmother's. My mother still has a godson there, and he was getting married. I remember the landing at Eppley Field as if it were yesterday. The view from the plane of the Missouri River was beautiful and left a mark on my heart. In the days that followed, I fell in love with the American heartland. I loved the open roads, the friendly people, and the different vibe and pace of life. It was so different from anything I had ever experienced in California. From there, stories began to come to mind, and I knew I wanted them to take place in the Midwest.

Before I started writing my first novel, I had published three volumes of a Greek-American literary journal, *Voices of Hellenism*. I also had writing, editing, and publishing experience from my family business, which is a general aviation news magazine. Just for kicks, I sat down at my work computer one day and began writing a prologue. The words flowed and before lunch, I had finished the prologue and felt proud of it. The novel was about a wayward young woman from California who had been sent to the Midwest to stay with relatives and to get on a straight path.

As I continued writing this novel, I realized that I did not want it to take place in Omaha because it would be too recognizable to friends and relatives to whom my mother was still connected. I thought about where I wanted the story to take place, and I ended up settling on Topeka, Kansas. Kansas is as heartland as it gets, and I have always been fascinated with that state because of its aviation history. Wichita is the home city to several American aviation manufactures, including Cessna, Piper, and Beechcraft.

It took me four years to finish my novel. It dealt with the whole cathartic experience of my life tied up in one big binder. While I enjoyed reading my humorous, episodic chapters, I knew that it was too long to ever be published. I worked on editing it, but in the end, I decided to let it be a catharsis for the time being.

I knew I had a problem with my works being too long and overwritten. I decided that I wanted to cater to Baby Boomer-aged people in the Midwest. Many of these people are truck drivers, schoolteachers, factory workers, or small business owners. They are not academics or people who want to read on for days just to enjoy a good or funny story.

In the second part of my novel, I had a visiting character from Kokomo, Indiana. Kokomo is in the Eastern part of the state, and unlike The Region, it has few Greek-Americans. As I was developing my Kokomo character, our family had a visitor come to town, a Greek woman from Merrillville, which is in Northwest Indiana. During this visit, we talked about my interest in the Midwest and my writing hobby. I learned a great deal from her about the strong Greek-American presence in this area. It is a large community of at least a couple thousand families. Many started off working in the steel mills and later became entrepreneurs, starting their own stores and restaurants. Still, others have remained in manufacturing for generations. The Region has the politics, diversity, and attitude of Chicago more than that of Indiana. It is America's purple heart, with both liberal and conservative bents. The Libertarian Party fits this area's beliefs strongly and is on the rise in Northwest Indiana. That was when my idea for a series of short stories taking place in Northwest Indiana was born.

My first several stories were much like the novel, overwritten and wordy. I knew I needed some advice. Back when I had my literary journal, I had interacted with the famed Greek-American author, Harry Mark Petrakis, who ironically resides in Chesterton, Indiana. Petrakis has always been one of my heroes; hence my character name in my fictional works

is Elpida Petrakis. Elpida is Greek for hope. On a whim, I mailed him some pages from my stories and sought his feedback. Much to my surprise, he wrote back within a few days with some thought-provoking advice. Receiving a piece of feedback from him was certainly a highlight along my journey.

Petrakis's advice encouraged and inspired me to continue my writing journey. He shared with me that when he first started writing, he overwrote a lot too. I continued to explode with ideas. I had so many ideas for stories that I had to start keeping notes on my phone. I thought about stories from my parents, grandparents, relatives, and church acquaintances. I outlined each story, and changed it enough so that it would take place in Northwest Indiana with spinoff characters that no one would recognize. By the end of 2018, I was up to two hundred stories. I decided I needed to see Northwest Indiana if I was going to continue along this journey.

In November of 2018, I visited Northwest Indiana for two weeks. I made it a research trip and explored several educational resources that taught me a great deal of information. I went to the library at Indiana University Northwest in Gary where I met several professors and had the opportunity to explore the Calumet Regional Archives. At the archives, I learned about the general history of the area as well as history that is specific to the Greek American experience. I learned about their experiences of arriving in Indiana, working in the steel mills, and building their churches from scratch. Perhaps an interesting fact was that the Greek Americans are the only group in The Region that built all three of their churches from their own funds and did not rely on grants from US Steel and other dominant corporations in the area.

I studied photos, essays, stories, and newspaper articles, and I was there for four hours. In the coming days, I did the same thing at the Notre Dame library in Mishawaka, the IU South Bend library, the library at Purdue Northwest in Hammond, and at several public libraries in various towns in the area. I took in the sights, smells, and sounds, and experienced weather that was so different from anything I had ever experienced in California. It was very cold.

To further my research, I also went to museums, including the old Crown Point jail, which is haunted, the La Porte history museum, and the small museum in Hammond's town square. I also visited the headquarters of the *Northwest Indiana Times*, toured U.S. Steel, went to the office of Whiting Refinery, and had a meeting with a radio station and the chamber of commerce in Whiting. These experiences deepened my knowledge, gave me refreshed story ideas, and expanded my horizons as a writer.

The best part of my trip was interacting with the locals and learning more about the Greek-American culture in The Region. Interacting with the locals taught me inside jokes, local slang, and regional history, all of which I can implement in my stories. I picked up a little bit more of the Greek language, and I came home inspired to resume my studies

and become fluent. It is interesting to note that the Greeks in the Chicago area do things a little differently than the Greeks in California. One experience that stood out to me was the amount of times I consumed *avgolemono* soup during my research trip. Of course, we enjoy this soup here in California, but there was something special about experiencing it on the verge of an Indiana winter. Their soup was very authentic and a noteworthy experience.

A funny but perhaps embarrassing story about the meals being too filling happened when I stopped at a relative's restaurant before going back to my hotel. I ate a very filling meal, a gyro sandwich. Then, the relative invited me to attend an event at the church. I chose to go because I wanted to meet as many people as possible. Of course, when I got there, there was another filling meal before me, and I simply could not eat. I felt embarrassed, but looking back on it, it is kind of funny. At home, I never have this problem. I guess when you combine Midwest mentality with Greek cuisine or vice versa, you end up with too much food.

Interacting with locals was my favorite part of the trip. Attending church, meeting people at various sites and libraries, and attending a local AHEPA meeting were a few great experiences of interacting with these locals. But I must say that I have a few favorites. I am fortunate to have some relatives in the area who made the experience very convenient and pleasurable. They took me to Chicago to see Greektown, took me out to dinner, took me to church, and invited me into their homes. Meeting them made my life and journey complete, and I will always be thankful to them for their warm hospitality. I also appreciated how all of the Greeks there expected me, a younger person, to refer to them as "thea" or "theo" (aunt or uncle). This is an old Greek tradition that has fallen by the wayside in California. Experiencing it gave me a sense of belonging like no other.

A huge benefit of visiting a different part of the world was being able to see certain aspects of my life in a different environment. For example, I have worked with general aviation in Northern and Southern California extensively, but I knew little about it on a national scale until visiting another state. During my visit, I went to both the Griffith-Merrillville Airport and the Elkhart Airport. Both were delightful general aviation airports with friendly pilots, vibrant aviation businesses, and pretty good airport cafes. During my visit, I was also able to explore my love for ranching and farming by visiting Fair Oaks Farms, a landmark farm with over a thousand cows that fuels the Midwest with meat and dairy.

Upon my return from Northwest Indiana, my stories became more focused, more vivid, and more historically and culturally accurate. Visiting Northwest Indiana (The Region and nearby Michigan) helped me find my voice as a writer. In fact, I gained so much confidence that I started seeking feedback from many in the Greek community. I shared the stories with business colleagues, relatives, friends, and people I knew in both California

and Indiana. I even started taking the stories to my grandmother's house once a week to entertain her with them. She has thoroughly enjoyed this experience, and it has been good for me too, as it has taught me to act out my stories with expression and humor.

My future plans for my writing include continuing to write short and humorous stories that cater to my niche, to edit the stories I already have, and to eventually compile my stories into a series. I also want to become a historian who focuses on this part of the country and talk about it on educational documentary.

In conclusion, I think everyone should have an experience with another part of the country beyond their hometown. Every person should explore their heritage and learn about their family history. Studying the Greeks of Northwest Indiana allowed me to see Greek Americans from another perspective. My studies of Northwest Indiana have given me depth, perspective, and another place to call home, along with a great new group of friends and family. Many people might wonder how they could do something like this. It is as simple as making a decision. I am not famous, wealthy, or highly educated. I just made a decision to pursue my interests and learn more about my heritage on another level. Go to your local library or explore other states and cities on the Internet. Find out where your people settled upon coming to the U.S. Choose a place that might be of interest, and take a trip there. Once you arrive, visit libraries, museums, archival collections, and landmarks. Interact with the locals of your heritage and beyond. It will be an experience you will not regret.

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