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### Bob Kerr: A connection that endures here and there

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Elizabeth Degaitas met Vasilios Karambilias in 1998 at the Ronald McDonald House in Providence where she volunteers. It was the beginning of a Greek connection that continues to move in several warm directions.

"He was 9 years old and I felt bad for him," says Elizabeth. "I grew attached to him. I'd talk to him in Greek. He was a stranger in a strange place."

Eleven years later, the connection endures. Elizabeth visits Vasilios twice a day as he recovers from the latest in a daunting series of surgeries. She helps him in and out of his bed and his wheelchair. She speaks the language of home.

"My parents used to say, 'You have to do something good every day,'" says Elizabeth who originally came from the Greek island of Naxos. "If you do a good thing it stays forever."

It is a good thing, this Rhode Island embrace of Vasilios Karambilias. It is good for him, good for the people who meet him.

"Vasilios, that boy is an inspiration himself," says Father Andrew George of the Greek Orthodox Annunciation Church in Cranston, which is at the heart of this very natural effort to ease a tough time for father and son. "He's so hopeful for his future. Some of our teenagers here need to see him."



Vasilios Karambilias and his father, Cristo, left and Stephen Morrissey, owner of the Coffee King, on Fountain Street, Providence.

*The Journal / Kathy Borchers*

I first saw Vasilios Wednesday morning when he and his father stopped at another of the places that make them feel not so far from home.

Coffee King is the place across the street from The Journal where George Trikoulis usually has my medium black coffee ready before I come through the door in the morning. It is a place spilling over with Greek hospitality. Trikoulis presides in the morning, Sotiris Mioni supervises the operation and Stephen Morrissey owns it.

OK, so Morrissey doesn't have a heavy Hellenic ring to it. But the Greek heritage is there and it is strong, and Coffee King is the place where Vasilios, in a wheelchair with his left leg extended in a cast, could stop with his father at a sidewalk table and talk of his American experience.

The family lives in Larissa, about 60 miles from Athens, where they own a small market. Father and son first came in 1998 for Vasilios to undergo a long series of operations at Hasbro Children's Hospital aimed at correcting damage done by shaky medical procedures back home. Bacterial infections had damaged bone and muscle and left Vasilios unable to walk or fully use his arms and hands. He became one of a long line of Greek children who have come to Rhode Island for surgery by Dr. Michael Ehrlich at Hasbro.

The Greek government covers the cost.

"After that first surgery, I started walking," he says.

But when he got back home and started growing, he started having balance problems. During this latest visit to the hospital, he has had surgeries on knees and toes. A bone in his leg has been straightened.

In six days, the cast comes off and the pins come out. He has started physical therapy.

"I thank very much Dr. Ehrlich and the team," he says. "They are the best. And the Ronald McDonald House — it is so good to have all the things I need."

He and his father are still several weeks from heading home. He is hoping for a trip to the New England Aquarium, maybe another to Niagara Falls before going back.

He'll take good memories with him and leave a bunch of good ones behind.

He has already passed the Greek college entrance exams. He wants to be an elementary school teacher and work with children with special needs.

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