

NELSON MANDELA AWARD
United Nations General Assembly Virtual Meeting
Monday, 20 July 2020

Speech of Mrs. Marianna V. Vardinoyannis, laureate of the Nelson Mandela Award 2020

- Your Excellency, Mr. President of the General Assembly,
- Your Excellency, Mr. Secretary-General,
- Your Excellency, Minister Pandor,
- Distinguished representative of the City of New York,
- Your Excellencies:
Chairs of the UN Regional Groups,
Permanent Representative of the United States,

Members of the Selection Committee,

- Dr. Morissanda Kouyaté, honored laureate,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me to stand before you and humbly accept the prestigious Nelson Mandela Award 2020.

It is difficult to find words to express my thankfulness and my profoundest gratitude to the United Nations, to Your Excellency Mr. President of the General Assembly, Your Excellency Mr. Secretary-General and the members of the Selection Committee.

I could never have imagined, that I would, one day, receive such an immense honour and feel so greatly moved.

I would like to warmly congratulate Dr. Morissanda Kouyaté on this outstanding distinction and his remarkable

I followed him on his missions and pursued my University studies abroad.

The first years were very difficult because of the dictatorship in Greece. My husband was opposed to it and was expelled from the Navy, imprisoned and then sent into exile. Although, I had a new-born baby and two young children, I felt the need to support him, so I followed him into exile. Fighting for human rights, became a part of my life.

After our return, we were blessed to see our lives changing radically, for the better, for us and our five children.

I always felt the need to give back to people, who were not so fortunate.

I am grateful to my mother, who taught me the first humanitarian lessons, as she was always devoted to people-in-need.

In the 90s, many children lost their lives from cancer in Greece. The dramatic efforts of parents to raise money and take their children abroad, for cancer therapy, inspired me to establish "ELPIDA", meaning "hope", and the first, Bone Marrow Transplant Unit in Greece.

In the beginning, it was very hard on me to witness the real tragedy faced by parents and I could not sleep, thinking of the tear filled eyes of mothers, who desperately looked to me for help.

So, I took the decision to stay strong and I even went to operating rooms to encourage them during the difficult operations.

This decision became the "motto" I live by: "It is worth fighting for even one child's life and I will never give up".

We had to fight cancer but also prejudice and discrimination, towards cancer patients, and we finally succeeded in changing mentalities.

ELPIDA united the Greeks, for a noble goal: to cure four out of four children!

In 30 years, we accomplished:

- The first Oncology Children's Hospital in Greece.
- 1.200 transplantations.
- 150.000 hospitalizations.
- Thousands of children cured from Greece, Mediterranean, and Balkans.
- A Guest House that hosted more than 3000 families.
- Affiliations, with the greatest hospitals in the world.

