

IN TOUCH WITH TURKEY SOUTH FLORIDA'S TURKISH COMMUNITY HOPES TO INCREASE AWARENESS OF ITS HOMELAND

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

An annual party designed to bring local Turkish expatriates together is developing into a community event intended to introduce the broader community to Turkish culture.

“We are turning our annual Children’s day celebration into a festival where we can share our food and our culture,” said Sermin Unsal, a board member of the Florida Turkish American Association (FTAA). “We want to involve the American community in south Florida. It will be on a bigger scale than in the past.”

The festival will be held from 11 a.m. until 6 p.m. on Sunday, April 21 at Tradewinds Park, 3600 West Sample Road in Coconut Creek. Admission is free.

Unsal, who lives in Weston, explained that this year’s event will feature crafts, children’s entertainment, music, art, typical Turkish food supplied by six local restaurants, and two presentations by the University of Florida Turkish Folk Dancers.

“It has been very exciting to put the festival together for the first time so that we can share it with the Turkish community and others,” Unsal said.

The family-operated American-Turkish Restaurant in Wilton Manors is already gearing up for the festival. “We will be serving some lamb specialties,” said Eric Aydin the son of the owners. “We find that our food is very popular both among our Turkish customers and among Americans,” said Aydin who lives in Oakland Park. In fact, Aydin reported that his family’s eight-year old establishment serves many more American diners than those from Turkish backgrounds.

The festival commemorates Turkey’s strong emphasis on children and has been celebrated since Ataturk founded the modern Turkish republic in 1920. Each year, the children in Turkey celebrate “Sovereignty and Children’s Day” as a national holiday. “All of the people go to auditoriums for special programs, children participate in parades and read poems,” explained Biray Altan who has lived in West Palm Beach for eighteen years. “Turkey was successful in having the United Nations proclaim a global day for children each year,” she said.

Other activities keep the Turkish community in touch with their roots. “We have a big new year’s party, a celebration of Republic Day (October 29) and picnics throughout the year,” said Ismael Ergan of Coral Springs who is president of the FTAA. Ergan said that his Pompano Beach-based organization serves as an umbrella group to bring the estimated 5 to 6,000 Turkish residents of south Florida together. “We expect about 1,000 Turkish people to be at the festival along with Americans and others who will come to see what it is about.”

While Turkish residents in south Florida gather with their fellow expatriates to remember their national holidays, many also keep in touch with family members and friends back home through a number of channels.

“Through the Fort Lauderdale Sister Cities program we have raised enough money to provide 240 wheelchairs to several groups in Turkey, said Meltem Birkegren of Fort Lauderdale. “We raised money in Turkey through the Istanbul Rotary Club, in south Florida through the Fort Lauderdale Rotary Club and throughout the United States through the Daughters of Ataturk.”

The chairs cost approximately \$150 each and each group raised one third of the total cost.

Birkegren, who was born in Istanbul, is the chairperson for the Fort Lauderdale Sister Cities Turkey committee. The organization has a sister-city relationship with the Mugla province in the southwestern part of Turkey.

Gul Saib of Boca Raton keeps in touch with family back home in a more personal way—through a 30-minute call every two weeks with her sister in Istanbul. “We respect family relations, so it’s important for me to keep in touch,” she said.

While Saib, a retired lawyer, has been here since 1987, she said that she still eats as if she was in Turkey. “I like McDonalds, but it’s too fatty,” she explained. “We like cooking with vegetable and olive oil, not deep-fat frying.”

Saib said that one of her favorites is Circassian Chicken which comes from the northeastern part of Turkey. “It’s a chicken dish with walnuts,” she explained. “You boil the chicken, then take the white meat out and mix it with walnuts. Then you make a paste with sauce and bread, add some olive oil, some red peppers and garlic. It’s wonderful!” Saib said that the dish can be ordered in local Turkish restaurants.

Most Turkish residents in South Florida said that for them, living here is comfortable while somewhat reminiscent of life back home. “There’s not much difference between the United States and Turkey,” Saib reflected. “We learn about U.S. history in our schools and we have many of the same freedoms that you have,” she said.

“Turkish residents fit in well here,” agreed T. Nejat Veziroglu, who has taught at the University of Miami for 40 years. “The United States is like the Ottoman Empire in that in both, many nationalities live together in peace and harmony, respecting each other’s religion and culture.”

“Both Turkish citizens and Americans were brought up in a similar society where they treat each other equally,” said Veziroglu, who is a resident of Coral Gables.

“Most who come here become Americanized and blend in,” said Erkan Nur who owns a real estate office in Boca Raton. “Most of them adapt well.”

Nur said that many Turkish-Americans come to south Florida initially to work at Siemens Information and Communication Networks in Boca Raton.

Nur and others said that they know of no anti-Turkish sentiment following the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. "From the first day, Turkey joined the United States in the fight against terrorism and we have been helping out in Afghanistan." He said that some Americans don't know much about Turkey and its people, or even where it is. "Some people think that we are a communist nation, but we are a member of NATO," he explained.

"Turkey is America's ally," affirmed Said. "We love Americans."

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