

# Maria Prastakou turns 180DEGREES to North America, Shows Her Stuff

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signed three bags that turns into dresses.

They have four collections so far and each has different convertible and transformable clothes.

She has a strong desire to explore and create new things. She took her first steps in the fashion world by making her own dresses for her dolls as a child and transforming her jeans into skirts as a teenager, but that is where her path veers away from her colleagues'.

Breakthroughs often are made by people who combine areas interest that few share. Prastakou enjoys mathematics, especially geometry, and "In school I was strong in arts and engineering. It relates to what I do now because the clothes I design are not strictly fashion."

One wonders what kinds of clothes Da Vinci might have created.

The engineers in her family are not in the structural or mechanical areas, but as computer scientists and electrical engineers, math excellence is require, and that includes geometry, so the ability to manipulate objects in space in her imagination vital to her work has genetic roots. Her visual and aesthetic genes must lurk in her siblings DNA too – she has two younger talented siblings, two sisters and a brother, but they are not in the arts – Prastakou is the family's artistic miracle.

Her, proud father Gregory



Maria Prastakou, who earned her degree in Fashion Design Technology at the London College of Fashion, worked for Vogue magazine and Athens Fashion Week while still in school. RIGHT: 180DEGREES clothes are intriguing, versatile and comfortable. After her North American breakthrough, keep an eye out for items like this from the Spring/Summer 2015 collection.

Prastakou, is Dean of the Wesley J. Howe School of Technology Management at Stevens Institute of Technology, and her mother is in the consumer electronics industry in Greece.

Prastakou and her family know the Greek business environment well, and she was blunt about its realities.

It is still a difficult place for entrepreneurs – reforms, what reforms – but crises make some people better. "Any problems one would encounter with a

company in ten years, I have experienced in one," that's giving me a lot of strength."

There are not many startups in fashion, but she connected with pioneers in other areas when her company won a competition for young entrepreneurs called EGG – Enter, go, grow, sponsored by Eurobank and Corallia.

The program gives them a chance to be part of an incubator program that offers free work space, tech, legal and ac-



counting support, and mentoring. There are no direct money grants, but the services are very valuable.

"I was in a space working with 20 other amazing people working on projects. We were all fighting for what we wanted to do, but we also supported each other."

The mentoring was especially valu-

able. "My mentor was an amazing woman who helped me visualize what I wanted to do. She helped with strategy and planning and business development," Prastakou said.

So there are people building a new Greece, but "in terms of bu-

raucocracy, Greece has a lot more steps ahead of her to make it easy to have a company."

"In the states it is so different. It was so much easier to bring the products. I didn't have to bring all my receipts to the IRS. In Greece before you start selling you still have to go to five different places for approval," she groaned.

"But it's not just government that is different, it's also the people," she admitted. "What really impressed me when I came to the States was that people wanted to connect me with others. It was a strong community feeling 'I love what you do. Let me connect you with this other person' – and they followed up and actually did it."

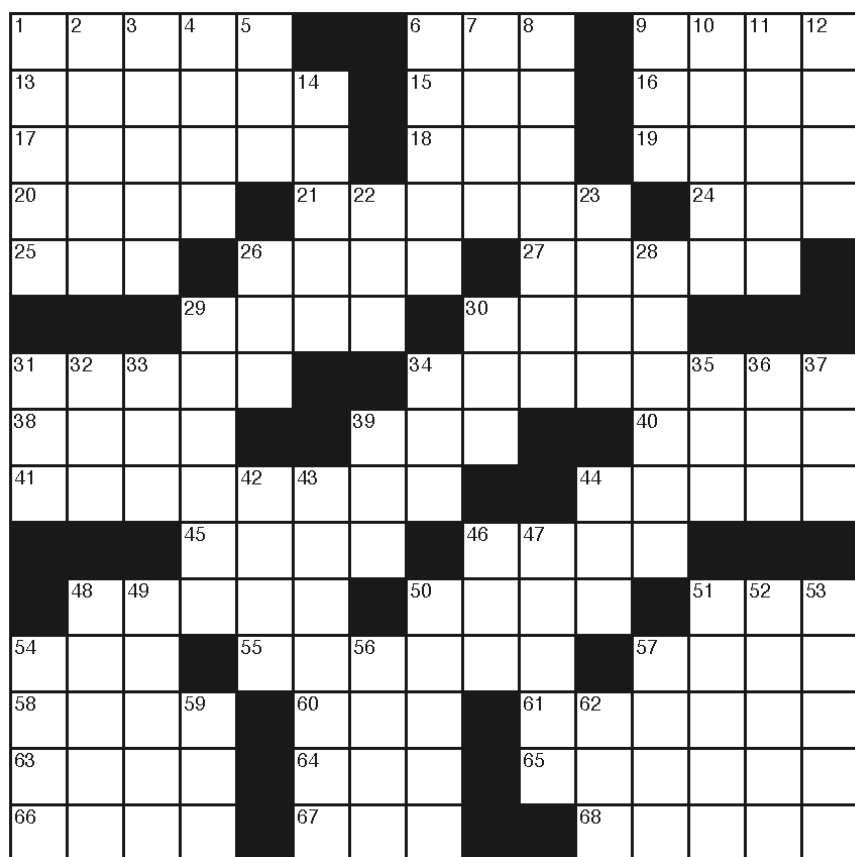
"That is something that in Greece we don't have. It's amazing that Greeks in the States have that, but people in Greece don't have that...they don't try to make things easier for others unless they can gain from it, whether it is government or people doing business...even if they are not competitors."

"It is very difficult for me to say this about my people," she said, but she herself is proof that things can change.

Prastakou has already told the people running the incubator that she wants to share her experience with everyone else, so her altruistic side is strong, but her competitive streak was sharpened in America.

She is very fired up and will be back soon with more items and her new collection.

## THE HERALD SQUARE TNH's Crossword Challenge



### ACROSS

- 1 Impose
- 6 Blackguard
- 9 Grk. soccer team
- 13 Greek goddess of wisdom
- 15 Rainy mo.
- 16 \_\_ matter
- 17 Largest Dodecanese island
- 18 Utilize
- 19 France & Germany river
- 20 Heredity component
- 21 City in Kansas
- 24 Seventeenth Greek letter
- 25 Unrefined metal
- 26 Rangers' Fotiu
- 27 Third Greek letter
- 29 Oxcart
- 30 Sixth Greek Letter
- 31 Kojak actor
- 34 Back of car swerving
- 38 Ninth Greek letter
- 39 "blind as a \_\_"
- 40 Island
- 41 Resentments
- 44 Foot joint
- 45 Something in orbit
- 46 Greek soccer team
- 48 Malicious burning
- 50 Cheese
- 51 Copy
- 54 HST's successor
- 55 Ancient City on Rhodes
- 57 Bland
- 58 Kimono
- 60 Zig's partner
- 61 Shine
- 63 Adjoin
- 64 Compass point
- 65 Wet
- 66 Second Greek letter
- 67 Male parent
- 68 Painting prop

### DOWN

- 1 Wells \_\_
- 2 The one left
- 3 European river
- 4 Yield
- 5 Vane direction
- 6 Seal off
- 7 Recess
- 8 Digs
- 9 Old-fashioned Dads
- 10 Morning bell
- 11 City
- 12 Corn syrup brand
- 14 Active
- 22 Fall mo.
- 23 Vow
- 26 No
- 28 Morning prayer

- 29 Asks for legally
- 30 Pimple
- 31 Knot
- 32 Long time
- 33 Long-term memory
- 34 Foreign Agricultural Service
- 35 Inquire
- 36 Infirm
- 37 Downwind
- 39 A Cartwright
- 42 Adze
- 43 Became electrically charged
- 44 Point
- 46 Flurry
- 47 Speaks with a hoarse voice
- 48 Mud brick
- 49 Repudiate
- 50 Sharp
- 51 Assumed name
- 52 Stick together
- 53 Type of alcohol
- 54 Dull
- 56 Rocket builders
- 57 Animal insect
- 59 Seventh Greek Letter
- 62 To be in debt

**WORD BANK:** Abut, ado, adobe, aim, alarm, alias, alma, ankle, ape, apr, apse, aris, arson, ask, astir, athena, bat, ben, beta, cad, cart, caulk, cede, claims, dad, dde, drab, dredges, easel, edam, edged, ene, enmities, eon, ese, eta, ethyl, fargo, fas, fishtail, flat, flea, force, gamma, gene, ill, ionized, iota, isle, karo, lee, lindos, ltm, matins, moon, nasa, nay, nick, oath, oct, omaha, ore, other, owe, paok, pas, paste, polish, rasps, rebut, rho, rhodes, rhone, robe, saar, sweaty, telly, tie, toledo, tool, use, zag, zeta, zit.

### Solution to last week's puzzle



The production of Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing at the SoHo Playhouse had two Greek principals, producer Demetri Kofinas, and actress Clio Contogenis (2nd from L).

## There's Much Ado About Something Here

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for theater has deep roots. When his parents took him and his younger sister all over Greece, the visits to the great ancient theaters made powerful impressions.

His dramatic sense was fired up by reading Homer and his favorite plays are the Orestes plays of Aeschylus, but his social consciousness took him to Washington DC – his sister Kalli is a lawyer with a social work degree, but a not unrelated spirit of humanitarianism was in the air besides the passion for healing of his father, Dr. Alexander Kofinas, and his uncle, Dr. George Kofinas.

He created and was executive producer for a TV news show called Capital Account that focused on international politics and finance and was globally broadcast from Washington, DC cable, satellite and online. "I was also the chief writer – it was my baby," Kofinas said.

Of his turn to theater, he said "This is the first time I have done anything fiction related," but not by design.

When he returned to New York he knew he wanted to move beyond the non-fiction focus he had in Washington and into the arts, but the theater tug came from Confer. She told him "I would like you to come on as producer of this play. I could really use your help with your production background." She was a theater and political science double major, but the play was her first production as a director.

He figures the artistic DNA came from his mother Eleni, who is from Euboea. "my sister is also an amazing photographer," but imagination has its place in medicine, so his father, who is from Elasona in Central Greece, could have made a contribution.

Genes and inculcation by parents are among the forces that shape people, but later experiences can cause people to veer off their paths – or provide new ground in which old seeds can germinate.

In Kofinas's case, he faced a medical challenge he said fundamentally altered him. "I've overcome and come through it," he told TNH, and it reinforced his feelings that it was time for something new after his TV show.

It seems he was born for exploration, both in terms of his



Demetri Kofinas, whose TV show Capital Account had an audience of hundreds of thousands, started in TV with freelance reporting in Athens during the 2011 riots there.

life's path, and the human condition.

He grew up all over America "I was born in Cincinnati but my first memories are from living in Astoria when I was four years old my father did a residency in Brooklyn." After a fellowship in North Carolina, his father opened a practice in Pennsylvania before moving back to New York when he was in middle school.

After graduating from NYU he worked for the university in Italy after studying the language on his own. He loved Italy, perhaps his stomach likes the food, but his soul is Greek.

"I am awestruck by what that society and culture generated," he said of Hellas, and believes that one of the things we can learn from classical Greece is to balance technology and culture.

"I have also worked a lot in technology and I am fascinated by that world," and the tremendous technological advances in our times, "but in the realm of culture, we have not made the same advances."

Philosophy is one of his favorite Greek things, and spirituality is important, but over time he has learned that organized religion and theology is not its only source.

"I was trying to think my way

to God," but after his recent experience, with also his caused his old passion for Plato to be eclipsed by the thought of Nietzsche, caused him to question much of his prior thought, but he was still in Hellas' gravitational field.

"The power of Greek mythology," partly seen through the ideas of Carl Jung "helped me...I saw that we are all heroes. That we all have a hero story...it gave me a strong sense of destiny."

And Shakespeare was a magnet. Much Ado About Nothing is a comedy and Shakespeare is best known for his tragedies," but he does not find them to be downers. He now knows, "It's OK, there is suffering" in life but it can be transcended.

Kofinas is now a strong advocate of art and literature as forces that can guide people through life's challenges. A society that neglects the arts neglects itself.

And they must be shared with everyone. All of Much Ado's proceeds will go to Art for Progress, a nonprofit providing arts programming to underprivileged neighborhoods in New York.

"It's an amazing non-for-profit that helps urban youth who are aspiring artists in New York obtain the tools they need," Kofinas said.