

Global Voices: An immigrant's uphill push for a greener Greece

By Carol J. Williams

Sixty years after leaving destitute Greece to pursue the quintessential immigrant's dream of striking it rich in America, Eftichios "Van" Vlahakis is back trying to do business in his again-impooverished homeland.

Vlahakis, who at age 18 arrived in Chicago with a student visa and \$23, slept in homeless shelters and did odd jobs at bars and restaurants while earning a chemistry degree at Roosevelt University in the 1950s. But he soon abandoned the toxins and caustic substances in use at his first jobs with companies producing aerosols, polishes and solvents, redirecting his knowledge of the Earth's elements to the creation of environmentally safe cleaning products.

He is the founding force behind Earth Friendly Products, his family-owned enterprise that touts its ECOS detergent as the No. 1-selling green laundry product in the world. Now he wants to expand its place in the European market with a new factory and distribution center in Athens.

Vlahakis' efforts to break into the protective commercial circles of his birthplace have encountered anything but a local-boy-made-good welcome. His plans to inaugurate the Athens facility during a monthlong visit beginning in July remain hostage to bureaucracy, corruption and resistance by industry colleagues who perceive him as a rival.

Greece suffers unemployment of at least 27% as well as tumbling incomes brought on by the demands for "austerity," the cutbacks ordered by international lenders in exchange for bailouts of the country's triple-digit billions in debt.

The jobs to be created by Earth Friendly Products at its new European production and distribution center would be small at first, Vlahakis says. But he points out that the company's practice of working with local suppliers of green ingredients, containers, labels, delivery services and recycling should eventually have an exponential effect on its contribution to the Greek capital's economy.

Vlahakis, 78, spoke with The Times about the motivation behind his decision to bring his green philosophies to his homeland, where fellow Greeks share his reverence for the environment but not always his foreign-acquired can-do spirit.

Q: Why is it important to you to take your business to Greece?

Vlahakis: I was born in Greece, and I want to see Greeks able to get green products that are affordable, so they don't have to choose between a good price and products that are safe for the environment. Lots of people are unemployed there, and our company will create jobs and support for the local economy. It's going to take time, but it will happen.

Q: So why are the authorities dragging their feet in letting your factory get up and running?

Vlahakis: I think someone is encouraging them to discourage us. If the delays were really about doing everything right, they would have given us a list at the beginning of the application process and said, "This is what we need from you." Instead, every time we give them answers they give us more questions. This is the way they operate to hold you away from the market. But we're not going to let them get away with that.

Q: Do you worry that the business development models you created in the United States may not work in Greece, that you may encounter friction with workers and managers used to doing things their own way?

Vlahakis: We had many of these same problems here when we first started. We worked it out, and we expect that everything will be worked out in Greece as well. People are always resistant to change at the beginning.

Q: How many jobs do you envision the Athens facility creating once it is fully operational?

Vlahakis: We have 300 here in the United States. Maybe one day the European facility will have as many, I don't know. But for every employee, there are another 10 people affected by that employment. We buy our ingredients and bottles and packaging from local producers. And our employees will be paid more. The minimum wage in Greece has been lowered to 600 euros [about \$800] per month because of the austerity measures. Ours will be 1,500 euros [about \$2,000] per month because that is what they really need to live decently.

Q: Is environmental protection as much a priority for the Greek population as it is in the United States?

Vlahakis: Yes. People are very concerned about the limited resources of a small country, and they are committed to keeping things green and natural, for themselves and for the tourists who are important to the economy. The green movement is growing in Greece, but it has always been important. I remember my mother cleaning with natural substances -- plain water, vinegar, olive oil. We primarily use coconut oil as an ingredient in cleaning products here because it is readily available. We will be using olive oil instead in the Greek plant. They have so much olive oil there they don't know what to do with it.

Q: What inspired you to undertake the making of environmentally safe products?

Vlahakis: I had a colleague at an early job who died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Working around all these chemicals, there were other problems that became apparent -- rashes and irritations. And there was a book that came out in the 1960s, "Silent Spring," which affected me very much. It gave me the idea that insecticides and other chemicals are not the way to go. I also started reading a lot about the warming of the Earth, about oceans and reefs dying, melting the ice of the North Pole, raising the water level and flooding coastal villages. That's why I have solar panels on the roof here and on my home. If everyone installed solar, we wouldn't need nuclear plants and we could cut back on fossil fuels.

Q: Where else in the world do you see opportunity for expanding or creating a market for green cleaning products?

Vlahakis: One of our first customers for ECOS was China. It has twice the concentration of other concentrated detergents, so there is a great opportunity to save on plastics, packaging and freight costs.

I've noticed that ships going back to China from here are usually going back empty. They bring their products here but they don't buy enough to fill the containers going back. The size of our company is not such that it will make a big difference, but if more American companies get involved in marketing our products to China, we can balance the trade situation with them and stop wasting fuel shipping back empty containers.

We will also be expanding to the Middle East through our new location in Europe. Piraeus is one of the largest harbors in Europe. The Chinese have picked that as their entry point to Europe and are building big infrastructure there to accommodate their ships. That will make it easier for us to compete in the Middle East, if we don't have to ship from the United States.

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