

An Interview with Lily Venizelos

(Taken by then 12-year-old granddaughter, Antonia Frangakis, attending South Hampstead High School.)

Fishermen catch fish every day, but sometimes other sea animals get hurt. My grandmother works to save sea turtles and give them rights. She also had other problems just like the rest of us.

Fact File:

Full name: Lily Venizelos

Place of birth: Athens, Greece

Date of birth: April 10th 1933

Favourite colour: orange

Favourite animal: wildlife: sea turtles, domestic: dogs

Sum yourself up in 3 words: hard working, visual and achieving

Has anything in your past changed your life?

In 1974 we found ourselves stranded, due to bad weather (we had a boat at the time), in Laganas Bay on the island of Zakynthos in Greece. I swam from the boat to the nearby beach and saw very strange marks on the sand. I kept coming back to the same beach every year until 1983. It was only then that the beach revealed its secret to me: this was the main nesting beach for sea turtles in the Mediterranean. The beach had already started to be developed for tourism; hotels were being built near the shore. That's when I first started the action for the protection of the beach and sea turtles that nested there. As I had no idea about sea turtle biology and conservation I avidly started to teach myself about it. In 1986 the first law to protect sea turtles was signed in Greece, mostly thanks to my efforts. In 1987 I was awarded the highest distinction by the UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme), the Global 500 Award in Nairobi. I was amongst the first group that this award was given to. In 1988 I founded Medasset (The Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea Turtles). I founded it in the UK and in Greece. From 1989 Medasset became the only organisation working exclusively for sea turtles in the Mediterranean. We have conducted research projects of over 1800km from Sardinia to NE Aegean Sea and from the Ionian Sea to the shores of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Libya. I have been lecturing all over the world on sea turtle conservation and biology, campaigning etc.

How long do you think you will be doing this for?

For as long as I possibly can.

Did everyone encourage you?

No. Nobody did to start with. My family didn't encourage me.

Nobody at all?!

When I started working I contacted several international organisations, made new friends and people started to help.

When you were younger what did you want to do?

I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do or where I was heading. It's very difficult to say. What I wanted to do was something worth my presence in this world and to leave something worthwhile behind me but I didn't know exactly what.

Where is the most interesting place you have been or lived?

New York. By far.

Why?

Because it's an exciting city, it's a city where you feel at home. One can meet interesting people who know how to mix. I enjoy the shopping, museums and the theatres. When I lived in New York I felt as though I was living years ahead of Europe and very much in the centre of things happening today.

Have you ever worn braces?

(Chuckles) I had them for 12 miserable years. At the time dealing with braces was a misery. Wire attached each tooth separately to the braces and one had to go back each week to have the it tightened. One felt like murdering the dentist.

Did it work?

It worked up to a certain point; they still had to extract one tooth from the top.

Do you have any annoying habits?

Yes. Interrupting people when they talk, I get easily upset, I'm too emotional and I undertake much more work than is humanely possible to deal with.

Have you ever had any pets?

I have had cats, dogs, chickens, rabbits and an African deer.

How many dogs did you have?

I had a Chihuahua, a pointer and a setter. All my pets were kept in Greece except for the Chihuahua which was kept in both London and in Athens. I also had three cats that were all strays.

Names of pets:

Rabbit – Councouni

Dogs:

Pointer – Tom

Setter – Emma

Chihuahua – Bambi

Cats:

Blacky

Cannot remember the other two.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

I have a brother. He is the director of Antenna T.V. His name is Spilio and he has lately been helping me with promotion of my work.

What was your favourite subject at school and why?

My favourite subject at school was Literature. I had a slight learning difficulty and I could express myself freely through writing and giving talks

What was your worst subject at school and why?

Maths and physics mainly because of difficulties in learning.

Teacher's Comments:

Excellent. This is a superbly detailed interview with a truly remarkable woman. You planned your questions very well indeed.