



# MACEDONIAN PATRIOTIC ORGANIZATION

of the United States and Canada

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## 2002 MPO Convention Keynote Address

### Chris Ilitch Touches Macedonian Hearts

*Following is the keynote address of Macedonian-American Christopher Ilitch delivered at the 81<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention of the Macedonian Patriotic Organization held in Dearborn, Michigan at the Dearborn Grand Hyatt Hotel over Labor Day Weekend in September 2002.*

Good evening everyone. It is an honor for me to visit with you tonight and to represent my entire family at the 81<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention of the Macedonian Patriotic Organization.



*Chris Ilitch and MPO President  
Chris Evanoff at the 81<sup>st</sup> Annual  
MPO Convention*

I would like to begin by thanking everyone who attended the Presidential Reception last evening for your wonderful hospitality. My parents were very touched to be honored, and greatly appreciated all of your kind words and support. And they were very grateful for the engraved Red Wings Stanley Cup marble table given to them by the Lebamoff boys. We hope to sign a few big name player contracts on that table next season.

We are so pleased that you have gathered here in the Detroit area, and we hope that you had a wonderful time dancing at the historic Fox Theater downtown earlier this afternoon. I'm sure that you'll agree that the Fox is a real gem, and I wanted to mention that this is the second time this year that the *horo* was danced in that beautiful lobby. I was married to Kelle almost 11 months ago and we danced on the same spot. I hope and trust that you enjoyed your time at the Fox.

I am both a Detroiter and a Macedonian, which make the opportunity to speak to you this evening very special to me. I was baptized at St. Clement. I was an altar boy there, and I, along with the rest of my family, was married at St. Clement. Our Macedonian heritage and legacy has been instilled in me throughout my life.

My grandparents, Sam Mitra Bayoff, and Sotir and Sultana Ilitch, were proud of their history and passed down so many beautiful and memorable traditions to their children and grandchildren.

I grew up probably like many of you – I was raised with *manja* and *pepperke*. My Baba's *zelnick* and *vealnick* were the best. In fact, the only thing more popular than pizza in our household was my Baba's *zelnick*! By Baba Sultana made fantastic chicken and rice and dynamite rice pudding.

At all holidays, after Dedo had a few glasses of his homemade *vino*, he would tell us all the stories about the old country. Mostly the same stories, but we loved to hear them and would laugh with him no matter how many times we heard them.

Mom and Dad spoke fluent Macedonian, but we only knew a few words. In fact, when they didn't want us to know what they were saying, they reverted to Macedonian. Did anyone else here have the same experience?

I also fondly remember that my Dedo always told us to "work hard and keep on going, and to never give up."



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That love of history and culture is one of the things I appreciate the most about the MPO. The organization's dedication to "promote and preserve the ethnic traditions, customs, and history of our people" is a cornerstone for all of us as we raise our families, volunteer our time, and develop our careers and businesses.

My mom and dad, Mike and Marian Ilitch, started Little Caesar's Pizza not far from here in 1959. And, ours is truly a family business. My parents have been at the head of the company since day one.

Many of my brothers and sisters have been an important part of our business, and my sister Denise and I are co-presidents of Ilitch Holdings. And, my Dedo worked for many years in the Spice Room of our pizza chain, and he still is with us in spirit today.

His proud portrait graces each one of the bags of spice that go to every one of the thousands of Little Caesars restaurants worldwide, and that is a tribute to his many years of dedication to the company. Many of our relatives, and many other members of the Macedonian community, are Little Caesars franchise owners too. So, our pizza company continues to have great Macedonian roots.

The "preservation" aspect has double duty for me – it's part of my Macedonian heritage and it's part of what my family has been doing in downtown Detroit for years now. In many respects, I believe that my family's commitment to restoring historic buildings in the city, along with building new structures, directly stems from the work ethic and cultural appreciation that they learned from their parents. As Macedonians, we want to preserve our legacy for future generations – our customs, our religion, and our dedication to family. As Macedonians in Detroit, my family has extended that philosophy and broadened it to the community at large.

My parents have continued the example shown to them by my grandparents, and it is that respect for people who have gone before us that has, in part, led us to the type of businesses and developments that operate today in the city of Detroit.

Our city has experienced some very difficult times, but its history is strong and proud. The same can be said of our Macedonian heritage.

When my parents, brothers, and sisters decided to purchase the Fox Theater in 1987 and move our Little Caesars corporate headquarters from the suburbs to downtown Detroit, many people thought we were crazy. The theater had been closed for thirteen years and most businesses were leaving the city – not moving 600 office workers into the downtown area.

But, it was my parents who knew that people had found memories of their experiences downtown, and they took a significant gamble when they purchased and restored the Fox.

Fortunately, that gamble turned into a success and we are proud to note that the Fox was just ranked as number one among the top 50 theater venues in the country with the highest ticket sales in the U.S. That means that the Fox outpaced even Radio City Music Hall in New York, and it's happened more than once. We are very excited about that fact.

The restoration of the Fox was really what started the ball rolling for a great amount of investment in the city, and the creation of the spectacular Sports and Entertainment District downtown that is anchored by the Fox, the Tigers' Comerica Park and the Lions' Ford Field.



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Detroit's image has been tarnished. But, it's beginning to shine once again. Our city is perceived as a desirable destination; as a city of many cultural and recreational activities; as a city of great economic opportunity, and, most definitely, as a city coming back.

We had and have a vision and a desire to give back to the city that held so many wonderful memories for our family.

That parallels the mindset of the MPO. We all are acting on our love of family and the traditions that have been passed down over the generations to celebrate who we are. While we respect our past and rich history, it's exciting to see how we move forward and incorporate that into our futures.

When I was just out of college in 1987, I had the opportunity to visit Macedonia. One of the highlights of my trip was a visit to Bouf. My maternal grandparents, Sam and Mitra Bayoff lived in that town before immigrating to America. The trip was incredible and is one that I'll never forget.

A high school buddy was my traveling companion and we arrived one morning at 6 a.m. by bus. From sun-up to sun-down we visited with all my relatives. My Great Baba threw her arms around me and was crying. It was an emotional time. Everyone in the house got into the spirit, as a man with just one tooth who was not related to us gave my friend the same warm welcome. My buddy was pretty overwhelmed, and he kept saying, "Hey, thanks but I'm not a relative!" But, it didn't matter that day – we were all Macedonian!

Not only did my Great Baba prepare a huge Macedonian feast for our visit, but she practically invited the whole town to celebrate with us. It was very moving for me to see the house where my Dedo grew up, suddenly all of the many stories he shared with all of us kids came to life like never before. It was a beautiful sunny day with a brilliant blue sky, and I was honored to walk on the same ground and see the familiar surroundings of my grandparents' home.

Actually, before my grandfather came to America, he had a few stops in Canada on his way to the USA. Back then, there were many people from foreign lands who were trying to gain access to the US from Canada, and my Dedo was one of them. It was extremely difficult to cross the border at that time, and many people were turned away.

Some of my Dedo's friends told him just to tell the border patrol he was going to a Detroit Tigers game, and ironically that is how he gained access to America. He stayed at that Tigers game for the next 70 years! So, it is the baseball team now owned by my father that brought his future father-in-law to this country. Boy, it's incredible how destiny works!

It is also a pleasure for our family to share part of hockey history with you tonight. I know that many of you will be photographed with the Stanley Cup at the conclusion of tonight's dinner. We hope that you enjoy seeing the Cup and all the names of the hockey greats that are engraved on hockey's Holy Grail – especially the Detroit Red Wings.

My family and I look forward to visiting with you all throughout the evening. Several of my family members are here this evening. Lisa is here with her husband, Glenn. They have three terrific sons, and Lisa is now a minister at her church. By the way, I want to acknowledge and thank Mr. Frank Torre and my brother-in-law Glen, who both made very generous donations to the MPO and St. Clement Church.



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My brother Atanas is here with his wife, Patty. They also have two wonderful sons and Atanas recently formed a charity in his name to help children with osteosarcoma where he visits and helps many young people who suffer from cancer. And, in addition to my parents, my beautiful wife Kelle is here too.

My other siblings are Denise, who has three children; Ron and Mike, who each have three children, and my youngest sister, Carole, who has two adorable children.

I have quick story that I would like to share about my brother Atanas that fits into the pride that we all feel about being Macedonian. Until age eighteen, Atanas legal name was Thomas. However, after the movie "Roots" aired many years ago, Atanas traced our family roots and found that we had a Great Dedo whose name was Atanas. The closest English translation of my Great Dedo's name, Atanas, was Thomas. My brother was so inspired that he legally changed his name from Thomas to its Macedonian version, Atanas.

There are so many great friends and family in this audience and it is gratifying to know that we have all gathered together to pay tribute to our heritage and the great land of Macedonia. All walks of life and many different churches are represented here this weekend, and we all are dedicated to stand united and preserve our Macedonian culture and traditions.

Thank your for inviting me and my family to be with you at this wonderful celebration of our Macedonian cultural heritage. Our family wishes you all great health and happiness. Thank you.