



MACEDONIAN PATRIOTIC ORGANIZATION

of the United States and Canada

2001 MPO Convention Keynote Address

Mike Zafirovski Weaves Macedonian Family Values Into His Work Ethic

Below is a story from the October 2001 issue of the Macedonian Tribune on the remarks of Macedonian-American Mike Zafirovski to the 80th Annual MPO Convention held at the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago, Illinois over Labor Day Weekend in September 2001.

Values inherent in Macedonian families were intricately woven into the message Mike Zafirovski delivered to the 80th MPO Grand Banquet. In the organized manner of a business leader, he outlined his speech before he began.

"This talk has prompted me to go back in time, to recollect special events, special people, moments of truth. It has been a wonderful experience," he said explaining that he had been president of General Electric Lighting prior to joining Motorola 15 months ago. Mike was born in Skopje in 1953 to parents from wealthy families from Tetovo, families whose properties were nationalized after World War II



Mike Zafirovski

When he was 16, the late Ljubica and Cvetoza Zafirovski moved their family to the west side of Cleveland, Ohio. For a while they struggled, as do all immigrants. His dad walked two miles to work in a factory, and his mother took three buses to the garment factory where she worked.

"But they never complained. They were so proud that someone had enough confidence in them to loan them money for a home mortgage, and they worked to pay back the loan." It wasn't an easy time for him either, arriving on Thursday and beginning school on Monday with about thirty-five English words in his vocabulary. He immediately fell in love with America, but at the same time was homesick for Macedonia.

"It is very difficult to make that kind of change at 16," he said chuckling at the look his 16-year old son was giving him from the audience because Mike had just moved his family from Cleveland to Chicago.

"I can't believe how welcoming American people were, but I still had a burning desire to have two lives - to know what would have happened if I stayed in Macedonia."

His memories of Macedonia are by and large good. He and his buddies climbed Mt. Vodno "every single week in the summer" and every few weeks in the winter. They spent a few hours on the peak, then climbed back down with wonderful boyhood memories to sustain them throughout life.

Sundays were spent with his father attending Vardar soccer games. "When we spent several hours traveling to away games my father would quiz me about various people, places and things in the world. It is very important to talk to your kids and to teach them."



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And he explained the great excitement of seeing all the dignitaries that came to Skopje from India, Egypt and Africa, and the hope it gave. "People want their leaders to be good and to do good. The right leadership can have a tremendous impact on the people." He vividly remembers the 1963 earthquake and how his father threw him and his sister under the bed believing that someone was bombing Skopje and how the miners who lived across the street went through the rubble trying to save people.

"Life is short and we need to make sure we live every day to the fullest," he told the group. In Macedonia, Mike's nickname was somats (catfish) because one day he broke a really large glass container of vinegar and while he was picking up the pieces from the mud his mother asked, "eh bre, sho bravish somats? (what are you doing catfish?)" Unfortunately a neighbor boy heard the comment, and the name stuck. Mike says the lesson here is to be careful what you call your kids, especially within earshot of one of their friends.

Mike also reminds everyone that none of us were perfect children, and we should not expect perfection from our kids either. He explains how his mother required him to take music lessons. He balked, and the teacher told her, "Lady, this kid has no rhythm. Have him go into sports or politics."

In Cleveland, he learned to laugh at himself, enjoy experiences, learn from them and get right back up when he fell down. His American history teacher asked everyone to say what they planned to get out of the course. When he told the class that he had just come from Macedonia, the teacher wanted him to tell more about himself and Macedonia. "I was so scared. I only knew a few English words," he explains, noting that the teacher then realized the problem. After class Mike asked for three weeks to prepare a 15-minute presentation about Macedonia. "It was the first time in my life that I received a standing ovation. I worked it to my advantage," he said.

And, he tells about the time the coach asked him if he played football. "Sure, I play center," the tall lanky youth responded, and then he saw that the ball was not the soccer ball he was used to. He soon ended up on the swim team and credits his coach for making sure he went on to college and reminded everyone that role models are important to all young people. "It's important to remember the people who help you along the way, and to go back to thank them," he emphasized. Mike's parents always held high expectations for him, so that when he beat Ohio's best high school breast stroke swimmer and was totally elated, his father asked why he only beat him by inches when in fact, he is so much taller than the other fellow.

And he tells of his mother going back to Macedonia, just as much an ambassador as Jeane Kirkpatrick. He fondly remembers the Turkish coffee she prepared each night after dinner to drink with her one cigarette-a-day - "I can attest to the fact that she never inhaled" - and the really hot peppers his dad ate every chance he got. Mike confesses that 30 years later he, too, eats hot peppers and catches a lot of flack from his sons.

One of his proudest moments was when he bought his parents a television set from his first paycheck in 1975. Mike praised his wife Robin for the absolutely wonderful job she has done running the household, handling the finances and the family's social life.

Her family's American roots date back to the Mayflower. "Ours is a true melting pot," he shared. But his pride in his three sons is about as Macedonian as it comes. Matt who is interested in business and history revels in meeting people like Jack Welch, CEO of GE and traveling to Moscow. Kirk, the more social of the three, figures out ways to go with his dad to the one weekend a year he reminisces with his college fraternity friends. Todd, the youngest, is the most quiet and the toughest, having had stitches several times.

Whether it is because of his attention or their own personalities, the boys exude a pleasant self-confidence rarely seen in young teenagers. "They are a great inspiration," he proudly told the group.



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The final segment of his speech dealt with leadership. Explaining that in 25 years, he has been president of six businesses for two companies, GE and at Motorola, moving his family to seven different countries to do so. "I am a firm believer in principled leadership," he explained noting that he believes this trait is embodied in such people as Gotse Delchev, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Nelson Mandela and Ronald Reagan.

He listed five principles for success as being: Delight customers, "you absolutely cannot forget this;" Create a positive, challenging work environment, "you need a place for motivated employees to meet their dreams;" Strong financial results, "Particularly in the old country, the profitability concept is not nearly as clear as it has to be;" Community involvement, "I am a firm believer in that what helps the community, helps the company;" Leadership value, "an organization is only as good as its leadership. I spend a lot of time recruiting, promoting and developing the best people in the company. There is more need for principled leadership today than ever before."

Lastly, he spoke of Macedonia. "I absolutely pray that good judgment, good reason and good will prevail and that for many, many years we will have our country to go back to and that the US will be an inspiration instead of a country that so many people in Macedonia are so unhappy with."