

# Thanassi Yiannopoulos: Reminiscences of a Life Well Lived

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## **Thanassi Yiannopoulos: Reminiscences of a Life Well Lived**

*Katherine Shaw Spaht\**

Although I was never fortunate enough to have had Thanassi as a classroom teacher, this does not mean that he never taught me. He taught me a great deal in the many discussions we had in Louisiana State Law Institute (“Law Institute” or “LSLI”) committees, in faculty meetings during the years he was my colleague at LSU, and in the summer of 1995 when I taught in his Tulane program abroad on the tiny Greek island of Spetses. But above all, he taught me to embrace life fully. His was a personality almost impossible to resist. His exuberance for life drew the attention of all present the minute he walked into a room. His gusty laughter announced his entrance. He lived life to the fullest and with a joy that was infectious.

He shepherded the first major revision of the Louisiana Civil Code in modern times, not only through the, at times, tedious process of the Louisiana State Law Institute, but also through the Legislature. The year: 1976. But Thanassi also chaired many other Law Institute committees after he finished the revision of the law of property, beginning with an ad hoc committee to review the Legislature’s revision of community property law in 1978. That was my first experience in evaluating his draft provisions, in this instance on behalf of the legislative subcommittee on which I served as chairman of its advisory committee. I was responsible for informing the members of the legislative subcommittee whether his draft departed from the policy decisions made in the 1978 legislation. It was quite an experience. We each argued particular policy points to the subcommittee, and its members ultimately made the decision about the content of the legislation. I gained a tremendous respect for Thanassi’s intellectual ability by virtue of that experience. That respect was amplified by serving with him on other Law Institute committees, many of which he chaired—the General Principles of the Civil Code Committee beginning with Article 1, for example. Although he was not the chairman, I served with him on the Conflict of Laws committee, which added conflict provisions to our Civil Code in Book IV for the first time, as well as the Lease Committee. To participate in those committees with the caliber of people appointed to serve

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was an academic's dream come true, especially serving with someone like Thanassi.

Each committee meeting was the most stimulating activity of the day, and Thanassi *always* contributed by virtue of his knowledge of foreign civil codes and their treatment of the issues and by his highly developed reasoning ability. It was a joy to watch. Of course, he headed other LSLI committees of which I was not a member, ultimately contributing more than virtually anyone else to the content of the current Civil Code. In addition, his yearly editorship of the Louisiana Civil Code included not just the articles and any legislative updates but many a scholarly "note" that directed the reader to background material necessary for a proper, and ultimately hoped for, understanding.

As a faculty member and my colleague, Thanassi had a continuing repartee with the other legendary giant of the LSU Law School faculty—Saul Litvinoff. Both retained their foreign accents although both had lived in different countries: Thanassi, Greece and Saul, Argentina. They constantly exchanged sarcastic barbs, good naturedly of course, to the great amusement of colleagues enjoying a cup of coffee in the faculty lounge, especially younger colleagues who may have had one or both as classroom teachers. They livened up the faculty coffee room. Even after Thanassi left the LSU Law Center for Tulane, he maintained contact with his former colleagues. Once in New Orleans and at Tulane, Thanassi took two of my closest professional friends and collaborators under his wing—Cynthia Samuel at Tulane Law School and Kathryn Lorio at Loyola Law School. The latter had the added advantage of a Greek heritage, making her an especially close friend of Thanassi. During many of our battles defending the institution of forced heirship, Thanassi named the three of us "the girls" and called us that well into our 60s. He was the only person I permitted to call me Kathy. He was incredibly loyal to and supportive of "the girls" throughout the latter part of his life, and that loyalty and support endeared him to all three of us.

During the summer of 1995, at Thanassi's invitation, I taught a course in Spetses, Greece, and it offered me the opportunity to see much more of Thanassi than I ever had before. This Greek man who had an incredible zest for life was in his element on this small Greek island. Dinner, never before 9 p.m., at a table for 8 to 12 people, Thanassi at the head of that table, filled with an abundance of delicious Greek food. Yet it was in conversation with him there that he also revealed some painful periods of his life, for he had been on Spetses before, not as a Tulane law professor, but as a young student at an English-speaking prep school. He had been identified as a promising Greek student and was offered the opportunity to attend this prestigious school far from home. Thanassi was from the mainland so the island was a

long way from home. He described his loneliness and longing for home while he was there as a student. Not surprisingly, in a search for an antidote to his sadness, he found poetry—not reading it, but writing it. He became quite the poet, even receiving recognition for it in his own country. Nonetheless (one of his favorite words), talking about that period of his life still evoked poignant memories for him. I never heard him discuss this experience either before or after that conversation; it left an indelible memory.

To prepare for writing this short reminiscence of Thanassi, I thought it might be helpful to watch *Zorba the Greek*, which I had seen before but did not remember in detail. The character of Zorba, played by Anthony Quinn, seemed instantly familiar . . . yes, he was exuberant, but so was Thanassi; yes, he had a lovely Greek accent to an untrained ear (although Quinn was Mexican), but so did Thanassi; yes, he could easily charm women, but so could Thanassi; yes, he was compassionate and caring, but so was Thanassi; yes, he was enterprising, but so was Thanassi; yes, he had suffering in his life, but so did Thanassi; yes, he was resilient, but so was Thanassi. We had our own Academy Award nominee in our midst, but unlike Zorba, Thanassi was playing himself.