

Dear guests, colleagues, and friends I would like to welcome you at this lecture entitled **Human Rights and Social Justice: The Indispensable Role of Education in the Democratic Project** by William Ayers, Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It is with a great honor and pleasure that we have Professor Ayers with us tonight who is in Cyprus as a guest of Frederick University within the Research Promotion Foundation funded project entitled "The Cyprus Oral History Project" This is Bill Ayers' third visit in Cyprus as a guest of Frederick University. Before I pass the microphone to our speaker I would like to thank the Association for Social Reform (ΟΠΕΚ) and the Cyprus Committee of the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) for collaborating with us to organize tonight's lecture and the discussion, the Commissioner for Children's Rights for her contribution to the discussion, and a special thank you to Frederick University without which this event wouldn't have been possible.

For the welcome address I would like to invite Dr. George Demosthenous, Vice Rector of Frederick University, followed by Dr. Eleni Loizou, Vice President of OMEP and Assistant Professor at the University of Cyprus, and Dr. Maria Karayiannis from ΟΠΕΚ.

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Please allow me to introduce our speaker and refer briefly to his work in Cyprus.

**William Charles Ayers**, born December 26, 1944, is an American elementary education theorist and former leader in the movement that opposed U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. He is now a professor in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, holding the titles of Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior University Scholar. During the 2008 Presidential campaign, a controversy arose over his past contacts with then-candidate Barack Obama.

Ayers grew up at a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. Ayers earned a B.A. from the University of Michigan in American Studies in 1968. He is the son of Thomas G. Ayers, former Chairman and CEO of Commonwealth Edison (1973 to 1980), Chicago philanthropist and the namesake of the Thomas G. Ayers College of Commerce and Industry. Ayers was affected when Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) President Paul Potter, at a 1965 Ann Arbor Teach-In against the Vietnam war, asked his audience, "How will you live your life so that it doesn't make a mockery of your values?" Ayers later wrote in his memoir, *Fugitive Days*, that "You could not be a moral person with the means to act, and stand still. [...] To stand still was to choose indifference. Indifference was the opposite of moral"

Professor Ayers' first teaching job in mid-60's was at the Children's Community School, a preschool with a very small enrollment operating in a church basement, founded by a group of students in emulation of the Summerhill method of

education. The school was a part of the nationwide "free school movement". Schools in the movement had no grades or report cards, they aimed to encourage cooperation rather than competition, and the teachers had pupils address them by their first names. Within a few months, at age 21, Ayers became director of the school.

William Ayers, Professor of Education and founder of both the Small Schools Workshop and the Center for Youth and Society, teaches courses in interpretive and qualitative research, urban school change, and teaching and the modern predicament. His interests also include teaching for social justice, urban educational reform, narrative and interpretive research, and children in trouble with the law. Ayers has written extensively about social justice, democracy and education, the cultural contexts of schooling, and teaching as an essentially intellectual, ethical and political enterprise. He has published over 30 books. His articles have appeared in many journals. Ayers is currently the president of the Curriculum Division of the American Educational Research Association, and a member of the executive committee of the UIC Faculty Senate. He lives in Hyde Park, Chicago with Bernardine Dohrn.

In his recent article in The Huffington Post (2/1/09) Ayers stated, "What makes education in a democracy distinct is a commitment to a particularly precious and fragile ideal, and that is a belief that the fullest development of all is the necessary condition for the full development of each; conversely, the fullest development of each is necessary for the full development of all."

Ayers was chosen by artist Robert Shetterly to create and display his portrait in an exhibition with the theme "Americans who tell the truth" alongside the portraits of other significant persons such as Martin Luther King. His life and his teaching prove his love for the people and especially the young ones and his eagerness for a life and societies that are truly democratic and authentic respectful of the rights and dignity of people. Ayers' contribution to education and his stimulating and powerful ideas on issues of social justice and democracy are very important, authentic, and relevant in our era, when issues of democracy, education, and social justice are being challenged, and are often so easily and emptily used. Democracy, education, and social justice are also provocative issues in the society of Cyprus, a place where the Cyprus' problem, and issues such as violation of human rights, occupation, and conflict urgently seek solution. Further, this is an era in Cyprus when educational modernization is underway, and the words *democracy* and *social justice* are so commonly used.

### **The Cyprus Oral History Project**

Professor Ayers is the Expert Researcher on the Project entitled The Cyprus Oral History Project: Illuminating our Lives, Teaching the Conflict—Truth and Reconciliation through Oral History Research. The host organization is Frederick University, Research Center and it is funded by the Cyprus RPF. The general

objective of the project is to address the controversy in teaching historical events in Cyprus regarding independence, the coup, and the invasion in 1974 that emphasize a single narrative and interpretation and to illustrate alternative approaches in 'teaching the conflict' and doing peace education by engaging a wide range of people's narratives. In particular, the aim is to collect, document, and create an oral history archive, and thus to preserve the narratives of people, in order to add depth and nuance to the historic record, challenge single narratives and interpretations, seek the truth through employing critical thinking and multiplicity of narratives and eventually contribute to the broader education of people within formal and informal education settings. Finally, a culture of oral history research will be created by offering seminar series on oral history conducting work throughout Cyprus.

I would like to thank you all for being here and to invite Professor Ayers at the podium.