# Now there's a bright IDEA




*The IDEA team during a beach cleanup on Evia. The sign says 'Good morning: Keep me clean'*

*As a non-profit with a difference, IDEA does just about everything it can do to help, championing accountability while cleaning beaches, planting trees and helping fire victims*

By **Despina Pavlaki**

HAVE you ever hit a determined wall of WWF volunteers trying to sign you up for a paid membership as you walked out of the metro station? Theodosis Tzanos used to be one of them - and he's proud of it.

"I had just given up my job as an engineer because that wasn't what I wanted to do with my life and I went on the street with WWF for six months," recalls the president of IDEA, a multipurpose non-profit group.

> "[We] make people part of the process. That way it's not like they donated 100 euros to some NGO. It's more like they spend 100 euros to buy homeless people sleeping bags"

"After speaking to about a thousand people I realised the main reasons they refused to sign up was because they didn't trust what you did with their money and they had no time. So I sat down and figured out what I needed to do to solve these two basic problems."

Tzanos' brainchild, IDEA, first occurred to him 4½ years ago as a way to overcome the lack of transparency in many non-profit organisations. And judging by the growing number of examples of donations not reaching their final destinations, he hit the bullseye.

## Any and all

The association is not cause-specific. Its long list of activities has included cleaning beaches, reforestation, disaster relief as well as collecting and distributing clothes, foodstuffs and homeware.

IDEA stands for *isorropia* (balance), *diaskedasi* (fun), *ethelodismos* (volunteering) and *allilegyi* (solidarity), an acronym that sums up the life journey of the 31-year-old former well-paid engineer and now instigator of grass-root initiatives.

"As soon as I was done with my studies and was discharged from the army I went to work for my father's company," he recalls. "I could have stayed there for the rest of my life and, before I knew it, I'd be 60 with a pile of money and not much else to show for it."

There came a point when he forced himself to sit down and think about what he wanted. "I conjured up all the moments of happiness I had ever felt and figured out exactly what it was that made me feel that way."

As it turned out, the only thing that made him want to get up in the morning was helping others. Hence his four-word life philosophy: balance, fun, volunteering and solidarity.

Once he had regained his balance, he realised he wanted to have fun. Fun is best shared with others, so what better way to establish meaningful connections than by becoming a volunteer? By joining an initiative, you immediately start experiencing solidarity. That's when you become a new person, or at least that's how Tzanos felt.

## Game changer

With that in mind he set about changing the NGO game.

"The first thing I did in order to deal with the tremendous lack of transparency [among non-profits] was

## The man with the plan

***Despite the Athens municipality's reservations, the IDEA initiative to give away clothes in Omonia Square was described as a great success***

**HERE'S** a funny story: the hardest part in getting IDEA off the ground was convincing the city of Athens that the non-profit agency for positive change really cared.

It started six weeks before last November's local elections. IDEA president Theodosis Tzanos & Co had been collecting clothes for a while and wanted to start distribution in a central part of Athens, preferably Omonia Square. Only problem was the deputy mayor they were told to talk to didn't want to hear about it. Literally.

"They simply refused to put me through," Tzanos recalls. "They just wouldn't let me talk to him. So I started calling every week, then every day, then every hour. Sometimes I'd swear he was right there, telling the secretary what to do in order to get rid of me. They were basically trying to make me give up."

Not that there was any chance of that happening. Once he was fed up dialling the same number over and over again, Tzanos simply emailed them, quoting the number of phone calls he had made and said unless he heard otherwise he would assume they were granting him permission to show up at Omonia with two carfuls of clothes.

> I'll have you know that the homeless people were a lot more civilised than girls fighting over the same pair of trousers in Zara

"The next day the deputy mayor called me up to congratulate me and told me to go ahead," he says. "You obviously have to become a problem in order to get things done around here."

Another concern of the municipality was of possible frenzy that such an initiative would cause in Omonia, with such a high concentration of homeless people.

And yet the clothes giveaway was a huge success. Fourteen volunteers showed up at the square, with none of the clamour predicted.

"I'll have you know that the homeless people were a lot more civilised than girls fighting over the same pair of trousers in Zara - or at least so they tell me," the IDEA president says. "It was amazing. There were people who wouldn't accept a second sweater because they didn't have anywhere to store it. They only wanted what they could wear."

A similar initiative at Viktoria Square proved slightly rougher, but it never really got out of hand and at no point did the volunteers feel they were in any kind of danger.

"I believe that the more civilised you treat someone, the better they'll treat you back," Tzanos says.

✓*For more information on IDEA, log on to* www.idea.org.gr



