

Food from the heart

By **Tonia Stavrinou**

It's 12 noon. The large black metal gate swings open and the sign is turned over to the "open" side.

A young man with a bicycle is the first one to go inside. He swipes his card at the computer and leaves, one hand clutching a sandwich the other on the bike's steering wheels. As soon as he gets to the road he opens it and starts eating. Two girls in primary school uniforms go in giggling, hand in hand. They give six cards to the lady in charge behind the counter and ask

for an equal number of sandwiches. It's their lunch. The door remains open for two hours every day from Monday to Friday. Dozens of people go in. Hurriedly, polite, stiff, talkative or completely silent. Some

rush to explain to the lady behind the counter "I'm looking for a job", "They've cut my allowance" "There's a lot of mouths to feed". Some say absolutely nothing. They avoid eye contact, they are in a hurry to leave. Mums with kids in prams, grannies, young boys, middle aged people. In the two hours we are there, some 300 sandwiches are handed out.

"I decided to offer a snack because I did not want people sitting in a dining room being offered a meal on a plate," says Sir Stelios Haji Ioannou, who set up a charitable foundation which bears his name, and came up with the idea for the "Food from the Heart" programme which was launched in Limassol about a month ago.

"The way things work now, you go in swipe your card, take a sandwich and leave - it takes a minute. I find it far more human than forcing someone to sit with other people in a dining room to eat. We feel that a quick snack that you can take with you makes people feel more comfortable."

"I DECIDED TO OFFER A SNACK BECAUSE I DID NOT WANT PEOPLE SITTING IN A DINING ROOM BEING OFFERED A MEAL ON A PLATE"



He says his mother's family home, where he spent his summers as a child, is close to the foundation.

"My grandmother from my mother's side Klio Misirli, lived on Navarinou Street. I have the most beautiful childhood memories from my grandmother, her yard and the neighbourhood. It's where I played in the summer as a child when I came on holidays with my parents. I have innu-

A franchise of love

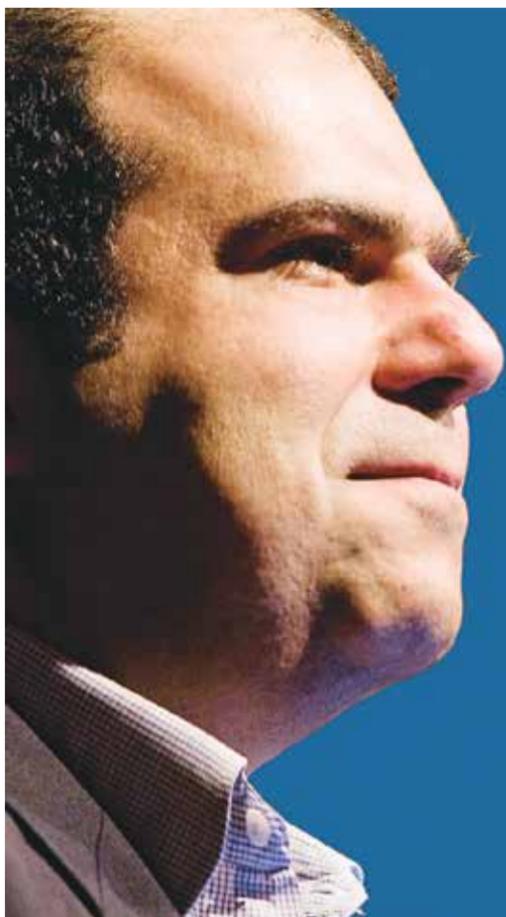
A free sandwich a day to whoever needs it, quickly and with no questions asked. This is the thinking behind Sir Stelios Haji Ioannou's programme "Food From the Heart" "The night I read about the haircut of deposits in Cyprus banks I started of thinking of ways to offer food. I considered it a given that some people would end up going hungry after that decision."

The programme "Food from the Heart" is looking for persons who are interested in preparing and distributing the snacks from their own homes, for which they will receive a salary depending on the quantity.

The Foundation will cover cost of the materials (bread,

halloumi, butter, tomato and cucumber etc) but also the equipment, tables. Knives, fridges and so on, for the duration of the programme and in addition will pay 30 cents for every snack that is prepared and distributed. If your house or shop is close to a central road in any town and you are interested in making and distributing the snacks contact Marios Misirli on tel 25365118 or email Marios.Missirli@stelios.com.

The "Food from the Heart" programme is offered by the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation on Argyrou Droushioti 8, Limassol A (tel 25365118) between 12 noon and 2pm from Monday to Friday.



from Stelios



Unacceptable to punish the working citizen

"I don't want to politicise the discussion, but I consider it unacceptable that a measure has been imposed that punishes the simple, conscientious, working citizen. They have come to punish a person for saving from his work, reversing what we have so far considered a model. What they have taught us since we were small children, to live prudently and put something aside. They've come and punished that model of the person we were taught

should be rewarded. If someone squandered all his money the night before the haircut he would have been at the same denominator as the person who lived his whole life without wasting so as to save. How not feel betrayed and deceived after this?" Today, he is looking at ways of investing in Cyprus, but not on a large scale. "I may buy some office complexes or shops. I do not have something specific yet, I'm looking at it".

What takes priority, he says, is to expand the food programme. "I'm always in favour of long term programmes to support a country an economy. But with the situation today, we do not have the luxury to look only afar. We have to look at our neighbour. And I know that Cypriots are already doing that, a huge wave of solidarity has started. Perhaps it's the best thing to have out of from this test.

merable memories from these streets. In a way this project is in memory of my grandmother. She died a few weeks ago aged 102. In those years, this area was one of the most beautiful in Limassol, with beautiful homes and gardens, nice people. Today you see so many people in these same neighbourhoods so many people who have fallen on difficult times. It is indicative of where Cyprus is today."

In the beginning he is surprised. Can it be so many people are looking for free food?

Most of them are more or less like your own neighbours and friends. Ordinary people who are victims of a very difficult situation. An inhuman "haircut," a dismissal, the dissolution of a small company, cuts in allowances, minimal choices.

"It creates mixed feelings. On the one hand you feel the satisfaction and joy of helping people get a meal, on the other it is frightening, realising the extent of the problem. It makes you choke."

Anyone can apply, simply filling in a form with a name, telephone, date of birth (simply to keep track of numbers) without having to give any explanations.

"I started thinking about this when I read on the internet about the haircut. Up till now my help to Cyprus has been through bi-communal prizes to young businessmen. It's important to help five to ten people develop their ideas, but when you see that it is a question of survival for the wider public you have to take immediate action. I've always believed that rewarding the "best" in a sector, they can then move on in their turn to help others in their society. But now is the time to go direct to the people in need."

He read about the haircut at the Cyprus banks on the internet when he was travelling.

"It appeared unbelievable, as I suppose to everyone. I wasn't sure I had understood properly

so I called an associate in Cyprus and asked 'did they really take your money and freeze your accounts?'. He told me, yes, that is exactly what happened and we don't believe it either!". He started looking to see how feeding programmes work in different countries.

"In Britain and in other European countries, they have Food Banks. In the US they have the Soup Kitchen programme which offers soup in the winter. In France there's the "Restaurant of the heart". Comparing the way they operate, I decided on a model which I considered worked the best for Cyprus.

DIFFICULT FUTURE

"It made an impression on me how a country can operate without a banking system for so long and how it can continue to operate with so many restrictions." Although he does not have particular business ties with Cyprus, it was difficult for someone not to have seen the signs.

"I and many others saw of course that the two biggest banks had expanded tremendously, they had become giants I would say for the size of Cyprus. I did not expect something like this to happen because I did not have exposure to Cyprus, it was not something that I monitored every day. I believed that Greece was in a worse state than Cyprus. But it has turned out that Cyprus has a much bigger problem. If you see it relative to its population, you will see that the banking sector has a much bigger influence on the financial sector of the country than in Greece. It has disproportionately a big influence. That is why the problem is so extensive. Cyprus has been proven to have a much larger dependence on its banking system. That is why I anticipate that there will be a bigger social problem.

"Beyond the blow to the economy and the everyday immediate needs of people, confidence in a system and a way of life has taken a blow."

