



FUR & LEATHER MATTERS

WRITTEN BY
CHRISTOS TALTSIDIS



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CHICAGO, 2014

Editor's Note

I focused on spelling and grammar in this book and changed none of its content. I wanted this book to capture Christos' life and his views.

Georgia K. Fountoulakis

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Hello, my name is Christos Taltsidis, a world master fur and leather artist. I write this book about my life and the art of the fur and leather to the best of my ability and knowledge. I gave it my all. And, for me, if someone gives it their best, that's all I can ask for. I did it to let people have inside knowledge of this industry, so they can make intelligent decisions about fur and leather buying, and how to get their money's worth.

Understand that a fur and leather garment is more than something just hanging on a hanger is. It starts with an idea. Then, the idea has to be turned into a sketch. Then, into a pattern, and some of patterns have to be made into an odd size. Then, it takes figuring out square inches on the pattern and then onto the fur. It takes energy and craftsmanship. It takes years of expertise. It takes effort, and about ten thousand individually made stitches to create a fur coat. When I put all those things together, I get a masterpiece!

I believe everyone has to see, at least once, how a fur garment is made to understand what it is we wear. The process and effort that goes into that creation is amazing!

When all leathers garments are made, the grain of the skins has to go in the same direction, regardless of which way the skins fit on a pattern. It is very crucial to follow this. Otherwise, a garment will have different colors, even though it is made from the same bundle of pelts. Also, it is very important that the stitching at stress points—like at the shoulders, armholes, pockets, and fronts—be doubled.

Depending on the thickness of the leather, the stitch count has to vary. I pay attention to every detail. Even the zipper size plays a big part on the garment. I prefer always to use, at least, a size seven. It's a heavier, larger zipper, will last longer, and still be very stylish. I use a size ten zipper for really heavy-duty leather products, requiring a lot of command. An excellently made leather garment with great stitching sells itself. Please avoid wearing poor quality products. An educated consumer makes educated decisions. Please buy natural.

For me, the perfect lamb pelt garment has to be 1.50 ounces thick. If it is less, then it will tear easily. It is also a lot softer. For a cow, it has to be 2 to 3 ounces thick. For chaps and other products, it has to be even more than that. When they are made well, they can be passed on to the next generation to enjoy.

I was approached about editing this book and putting it through a sentence checker. They said that people will not understand my book if it is not properly worded.

I said, "If I do that, then, it is not my book anymore, if I give it to someone to do the proper sentencng."

So, I looked over every change made, no matter how small. The book has to be me, my own thoughts, even my own spelling of words. It has to be authentic—not, what is called, sugar coating. I want this book to be straight from my inner self—how I think, how I function in my everyday life. I want people to understand me—my flaws and strengths—to understand my individuality, the way I express myself—right or wrong. This book is coming only from myself, who I truly am, where I come from, where I am going, to be a part of my life, to understand my soul that lives on this mother earth, together with your soul, and understand how easy, great, beautiful, difficult life is for all of us. And, once you read this book, you will automatically be part of my life.

Universe—what an indescribable word, with infinity that has no end. Our God, the creator created it, with absolutely no mistakes. What harmony, for things to work together, to come to a degree of perfection, in a great resolve, to sustain life, as we know it, at the end of every day. Imagine for a moment, just from the rain alone, how things transpire and transform our world. Just think about how our earth has its own way of rejuvenating itself—every second, with rain and ice. Do not always run away from rain. Get wet, sometimes. You will be blessed. There is no purer water than that to get wet with.

Please follow nature. Eat very well and natural. Eat everything. Look at the Serengeti in Africa. Look at nature. When a wild beast tries to cross the river, only the strong survive. Only the strong make it across. So, eat NATURAL as much as possible. Like all the Greek philosophers say, *pan metron ariston* (moderation, in Greek), which means eat anything and everything you like and want. Do not deprive yourself and your body from the way God intended for you to enjoy on your journey in this place, some of us call it mother earth. It is true you are what you eat. So eat everything you heart desires. That way you can be healthy for yourself and your family. So, put and see everything on the end of your fork, rather see what is at the bottom of pill bottles. You will be very healthy. Have a Greek wine, one glass every night. Right there, you will be adding years to your life. Also, use Greek olive oil for your everyday consumption. Use Mediterranean cuisine as much as possible.

We humans are the supreme beings, to protect, and control, our air, our earth, and our oceans. One of God's countless creations. Natural fibers—they are in fur and leather. He created for us to use and to survive with. From the dawn of life, we humans clothe every one of us with fur and leather to protect ourselves from the elements and keep

warm, so we can continue our species into the future. That is a fact. That is our life. I do not under estimate the power those natural fibers have—around the world, for billions of years. Even in this great country in which we live, the corner stone of our economy was very heavily based on pelt and skin dealings between our forefathers, the Indians, the cowboys, the English, and the French. In our own country, the great U.S.A., our own very existences was based on furs and leathers.

I cannot stress this fact enough times in my book that fur and leathers are three dimensionally woven natural fibers. They last a long time. Sometimes they out last the original owners, because, again, God does not take short cuts. He builds masterpieces. Fur and leather are ecofriendly, biodegradable, renewable energy. Put leather or fur in the ground. In six months, it is gone. Try that with any other material and that won't happen. So, I want to show my respect for mother earth, to keep it clean, as best as I can, and teach others to do the same.

So our mother can reward us back, and to insure a healthy future for the next generation of our species. I do my part by taking already-made coats and redesigning them into a new fashion and new style, creating new garments.

This is my life as Christos Taltsidis, the master fur artist of the world. My people (customers) are proof of that.

Growing up, I was one of those kids that could never sit still in school, at home, especially out of the home, at our play grounds, at the prairies—especially in the middle of August, when the combines were harvesting wheat. My friends and I were following them all along the time they were at my village. We thought it fascinating—all the birds, rats, raccoons, and snakes we encounter at that time, watching the whole process unfolding in front of us.

I grew up in the village of Pteria, in Kastoria, Greece. Just like any other kid in the world, I am sure they also would have many stories and adventures to tell and share from their own lives. The high mountains of the northwestern part of Greece are snow covered, pretty much all year around, especially the tallest one—Grammos. In the summers, the days are perfect, a lot of sunshine and thousands of different flowers everywhere. Some of them, I remember from my grandparents. They were medicinally very beneficial. I especially remember a particular flower my grandfather John would do a mash of that, putting olive oil, and adding our homemade Tsipouro (moonshine), mixing all together applying on any wound at night. By morning, it would be healed, almost completely closed. At night, you need a cover to sleep. It is a perfect night sleeping weather, even though the perception is that, in Greece, the summers are hot and dry. Also, Chicago and Pteria are on the same latitude. Who knows? Maybe, someday, Chicago and Pteria can become sister cities and villages through me.

Kastoria is a different paradise, weather wise too. Pteria has a river running at the south and north part of the village. In order to get to the river, as kids, we had to go about two miles down a dangerous cliff. If, God forbid, one of us slipped down, it was certain death. In any case, we still continued doing it all the time, because nobody wanted to go the long way.

There were also five water irrigation channels in and around the village for all our homes' usage. Everyone would go there to get their water for cooking, drinking, and for all our animals to drink. We had an abundance of fruit and nut bearing trees. From chestnuts, to cherries, to apples, the list goes on. Every household grew fields of grapes to make their own wines and home spirits. Bragging rights would not stop until the following year regarding who made the best wine, and whose wine had the greatest color.

About two miles downhill, northwest of Pteria, is the main road, connecting all the other five villages in the area. At one time, this was the only asphalt-paved road that went all the way up to the last village of Greece called Dipotamia, which is near the Albanian border. In Dipotamia, lived my father's older sister Eleni, with her husband Giorgo, daughter Despina, and son Niko. At the edge of the downhill, where the main road is, there is our river going around with twists and turns, continuously, with a lot of rocks and boulders in it—for possibly millions of years—and a very narrow two-lane bridge going over it, and 5 more homes along the side of the road. Also, there is the only water mill in the area right next to the river, where others and we used to bring our wheat and corn to turn it into flour, so we can make our bread for the year. In the summer of 1969, a huge truck came to Pteria to sell watermelons. I found that out, at a later point, that the truck was at Pteria already. After the sale, the truck came down from Pteria to the main road to go back to Kastoria, stopping right in front of the fifth house, which we used, and which was used as a bus stop.

Because there was no bus going to Pteria, we had to get off at the main road and walk two miles up hill to the village. God, oh my God, when it was a winter or raining, the mud, in some places, could come up to our knees. Try walking in that heavy mud, plus the cold. It was adventure by itself for everybody. Here I am, with my cousin Kiriako, his cousin Kiriako, the son of my father's first cousin, Dimitri, my neighbor's son Bobbi, and my cousin's uncle Savvas. We also called him Ntaees. Ntaees was the one who signaled the truck to stop in order to get a ride to go to the next village. We had just come there from swimming at the river. Those days, everybody picked up others, everybody gave free rides. Nobody charged any money.

So, Mr. Savvas (Ntaees) said to us, "Well boys, I am taking a ride with the truck to go to the next village—Oinoi—to

see my friends.”

My cousin wanted to go with him to Oinoi, too—not so much myself. My only concern was not to be separated from my cousin Kiriako. There were no extra seats in the truck anyway for all of us to sit. This was a split second decision, as far as what to do, to go or not to go. Then, my cousin Kiriako jumped on the back of the truck. All of us followed. The truck was too tall. We could not hold on in order to climb into the platform of the truck to get a ride and go with him. The truck started gaining speed. We were still hanging on the back of it. We got scared. I looked to my right. I saw my cousin let go of his hands off the truck. I was the last one to let go. Everybody was injured when falling; but, somehow, everybody managed to walk away—except me. The last thing I remember is letting my hands go from the back of that truck. They left me on top of the asphalt, laying there. I guess they all panicked, were scared, and left. About half a mile away, a lady by the name of Chrisoula was grazing one black and white colored, huge cow. It was kind of uphill, so she could see the main road.

She said, “Oh, my God! I am looking at the back of the truck. I see something like sacks of some sort falling out of it. I continue looking. But, it cannot be a sack of any sort, because some of them are moving. Some of them are walking away. I see only one not moving. Meanwhile, I am trying to get there as fast as possible to see what is happening. I am pulling my cow and pulling. It does not want to move too much. So, I pull the cow again to the nearest tree. I tighten the rope and run to see what is going on.”

Chrisoula was kind of a healthy looking woman. She continues, “I run down there. I see you in a pool of blood, just lying there unconscious. I run again to get the watermill man, the person who ran the watermill. We pick you up, take you to the river, and throw water on you to wake you up. But, we are unable to revive you. We try and try. We

cannot do it. We bring you back to the watermill. We lay you down on top of some empty sacks of white and yellow flower of wheat and corn, and cover you with the same sacks.”

And, there, with God’s miracle, I opened my eyes for the first time. I did not know how much time had passed between the fall and the moment I regained consciousness. The only thing I remember is letting my hands go of the back of the truck, then finding myself at the watermill, laying there covered with flour sacks, and white and yellow flour all over.

I spent about two weeks with my father’s cousin’s son Dimitri, who also got injured in the head like me at the hospital in Kastoria. I was happy I had company at the hospital. We shared the same room. My mother told me that, at Pteria, people were saying that we were trying to steal watermelons from the truck and fell down trying. That is how and why we got injured.

People always have opinions about everything, and assume a lot of things. Opinions are not based on the truth. They are always derived from where they come from and from each person’s life experiences and upbringing. From the things you see, do not make a decision. What you see, everybody sees same as you do. It is no different. Every person sees the same way the same things. To be cool in life is to be able to make great decisions from the things you see and cannot see, to be able to determine the truth and the future of life. From what you hear do not believe anything. From what you see, believe half.

The summer days in Kastoria are perfect, and the nights get only cold enough that you just need long sleeves and a blanket at a sleeping time. In the summer time, I never used shoes, maybe because we did not have the money to buy them. Nevertheless, I did not like to wear them, even outside the house. At the prairie, we would run barefoot and play, climbing trees, and picking cherries off the top of the trees. In the village, there were no fences. So, we would go

anywhere at any time. We would play hide and seek in the army barracks that they built all around Pteria, in our animal barns, hay barns, in the chicken coups. And, then, get yelled at from my grandma Savato, because we would get chicken lice some times.

From the age of six and up, my two best friends, Kostas and Giorgos, and I, were known as the holy trinity in my village, because if you saw Christos, then somewhere around the corner for sure, you would always find Kostas and Giorgos, too. Or better yet, let me go back to my grandparents of both sides of my families. They came to Greece in 1922 from the Black Sea area, called Pontos, which is present day Turkey. My mother's parents and my father's parents were both orphans. When they were 12 years old, their parents were killed at Pontos by the Ottoman Empire. That was the first holocaust that took place in the world. The Kemal Ataturk's regime killed 350,000 Greek people that lived peacefully in their country in the territory called Pontos, with main towns Kerasounta, Sampsounta, and Sinopi, and the Panagia Soumela, the largest church in the Balkans, all along the Black Sea area and the Aegean, sea side towns like Smirna of modern day Turkey. Around the same time, they killed one million Armenian people, and took our country out of our hands and their country out their hands.

Now I will jump to my mother. She shared her story with me. In the fall of 1949, when she was 12 years old, her father was sick and could not work on the farms at all. Their only income came from farming and cattle raising. So, my mother took it upon herself to plow and sow the fields that fall, with a pair of oxen. Her older brother Giorgio was in the army. She plowed and sowed enough so they have wheat and corn for the following year for flour to make bread. In the process, she pulled her leg out at the hip, causing her to limp. The steel plow was too heavy to lift and maneuver at the same time. Remember she was 12 years old and only 5'

4.” So, the following year, my grandmother could not stand the fact that she gave a birth to healthy girl that now was limping. So, she went to the wise woman of the village that just happened to be the next-door neighbor. After disclosing the matter, they decided and came up with a plan that for 6 months they will make my mother very, very skinny by not giving her enough food to eat. My grandmother later said that was one of the toughest decisions she ever made in her life. After the 6 months went by, she was so skinny she weighed like a feather. The wise woman said, “Put her in hot water all day long. In the evening, I will come over, about 7:00 pm.”

She arrived, and they tied my mother down. They broke/unsnappped her leg from where it was growing the wrong way, put it back at in its socket, and realigned it perfectly back to the right place. At this point, the pain was unbelievable. My mother cried and cried when she told me about this part of her life. I cannot even imagine that kind of situation for me or for anybody in the world. For six more months, she was bedridden, recuperating. They fed her chicken every day to get well and strong. Since that time, my mother is a perfect woman. She never limped again in her life. She says. Believe more in a person’s character, knowledge, and well roundness, rather than the oaths they take. Do not get or make friends fast. But, when you gain a friend, do not let them go. And, if you want to be a leader, first learn how to become one. Thanks grandma, Paraskevi. You are a great and courageous woman. Thank you for my mother. Thank you. Thank you. My mother is the toughest, most honest, most loving, and hardest working woman in the world.

My father was great with his hands, his mind, and his heart. That makes him an artist. When he was a kid, he built musical instruments. He knew how to play them. One instrument he built is called a lira. It is a Pontian instrument from the area of Pontos on the Black Sea. It measures about 20” long and 4” wide at the bottom and comes to a round of

3” at the top. It has three strings. The bow is made of wood and horsetail hair.

He also built a carriage for the oxen to pull and transfer farm hay and other farm products. He did all this when he was about 16 years old. My mother’s mother Paraskevi always liked my father—even when he was a young man. She used to say to my mother. “Check that Giorgo out. That kid always keeps himself busy—always building and creating something.

My father told me a story about one summer when he was taking care of the family’s 50 sheep. He was about 14 years old. He had a huge dog, named Karamanos. I mean gigantic. That’s how he described him to me.

One beauty full sunny day in August, he took the sheep out to graze in the prairie. When he brought the sheep to the irrigation channel for water, at about two in the afternoon, two wolves were there. Karamanos saw them and took off like bullet towards them, chasing them. It got dark, but Karamanos still failed to show up, and my father had to bring the sheep back home. It had to be midnight. Yet, there was still no sign of Karamanos. My father said he was very upset about his dog, and was blaming himself for the whole situation. But, what could he have done? He was thinking for sure that the wolves got him. About 3:30 in the morning, here comes Karamanos, walking ever so slowly, his body full of mud and blood. Even my grandfather Haralampos was up, because he was waiting for the dog too. They washed, cleaned, and dried him. To their amazement, they found no major wounds on his body. The excitement was huge for everybody. My grandmother Savato woke up my father’s sisters, Maria, Fevronia, Eleni, and Sofia and his brother, Apostolis. Nobody went back to sleep after that. All the theories as to how this could happen—two wolves against one dog. The spike collar they put on his neck for protection, in cases like these, saved Karamanos. Karamanos

lived to be 18 years old. The whole family loved him.

My father was telling me about his dog when I was about 6 years old. He was telling me the story with such a drama and feeling I remember literally hanging from his lips. I used to ask him to tell me the story numerous times over and over again.

I am very proud of my parents and all of my grandparents and relatives—best in the world. I love my aunt Maria, my father's younger sister. She is a special person for me in my life, as well as her husband, Stathis, their son, Giorgos, his wife Teresa, and their kids, Jordan and Steven. I have in my heart my mother's intelligence, spirit, her way of looking at things from a different perspective, her ability to see projects completely done in her mind, when they are still in their first stages, and hard work; plus, my father's artistry, quickness of thinking to resolve any situation, and his creativity. Thank you both for making me who I am. I always will strive to be the best as I can be, to leave your teachings to my kids. Thank you. Thank you, *patera* (father in Greek) and *manna* (mother in Greek).

My father and mother both left from Pteria, having lived two houses apart. All of Pteria had about 35 homes, no traffic lights—not even a stop sign for that matter. My father had jet black, curly hair with big brown eyes—a very handsome man. My mother had black hair, waist length, with blue eyes, like the blue skies of Greece. They got married in 1960 at Pteria. After about a year, I was born. For economic reasons, they moved to West Germany for employment, leaving me behind to be raised by my father's side of the family. They left me to my grandfather Haralampo, my grandmother Savvato, my father's sisters Eleni, Maria, Fevronia, and his brother Apostoli. In 1962, my parents lived in Germany. Unfortunately, they got separated for an unknown reason that I never learned or even asked about it.

In the meantime, back in Greece, I was not baptized yet

nor given any name. They used to call me just a baby. Time was running out. I had to have a name. But, because nobody knew the intentions of my father and mother regarding whether they would ever get back together, both sides of the family were talking about that. Due to the Greek tradition of naming kids after their grandparents or other relatives, there was a dilemma. In case my parents did not get back together, if they named me after my father's side, then my mother's side probably would disrespect me. If they named me after my mother's side, then my father's side probably would disrespect me. This is like never being the judge amongst your two best friends, because in the end one of them for sure will disrespect you. But, if you become the judge for two people that hate each other, one of them for sure will become your best friend. So, my grandmother Savvato consulted the wise older woman of the village. After two hours, she said.

“Well, it is very simple. We will name him after Christ (in Greek, Christos). That way, nobody can say anything bad or disrespect him, regardless of what his parents decide to do.”

That's why I am not named Haralampos (in English Bobby, or Giannis, in English John). The name I was given has had a big impact in my life.

My parents got back together, and I have two sisters Savato (modern Toula) and Despina, in English Debbie. My younger sister, Despina, got named after my mother's sister, who was killed in the war with Germany in 1941.

When you have power, people should respect, rather than be afraid of you. Learn to govern and protect your home.

In 1966, my parents came back to Greece from Germany to Pteria to my grandparent's Haralampos' and Savvato's house. We lived in that home until 1972. My father bought a tractor and used it to plow our farms and other villages' farms to make money. My mother stayed at home to take

care of my sisters, my grandparents, my uncle Apostoli, and me. We had to take care of seven cows. All of them were different colors. My favorite one was all black. It had only one white spot, in the middle of its head, in front, just below its horns. That white spot—it was like the letter delta—looked like a pyramid. The cow's name was Sachara. We raised numerous calves. We also had one, donkey named Chorozi. It was kind of small in stature, but very strong and stubborn. It had black and white colors. We did not have any horses, but other families did. We had a lot of chickens—free range, of course. All of them were very colorful—especially our two roosters. For some reason, our roosters did not fight a lot.

My mother again did the impossible. She had to cook for all of us every day, plus all the guests and relatives who visited us, feed all our animals, clean them and the barn, and even some times, help our cows give birth to our calves, seeing those calves become bulls or cows. I was there to see it all from the insemination to the birth of the calves. The calves were very playful. They ran a lot and fast, but their mothers were very protective of them. So, as kids we had to be very mind full of that.

I helped my mother as much as I could—milk the cows, feeding, brush, and keeping them clean. From that milk, we make our own yogurt and butter. My favorite time was helping my mother milk the cows. That was the best part. To drink milk—so fresh—right there, without even boiling it. Try it. You will love it. Sometimes it was not fun—like when the cow would kick the bucket, after milking for ten minutes. I was doing great learning that, first, I had to bring the calf to have milk, and know when to milk the cow afterwards.

My mother made 12 village breads once a week with no preservatives added to them. We had an outdoor stone-built furnace. In order to prepare the furnace to cook our

bread, we had to put wood inside it, light it up, and build up a strong fire. Then after two hours or so, my mother had to clean all the charcoal and ashes from the floor of the furnace. She used about a three- to four-meter long wooden stick, which had a rag tied to the end of it. She had to keep that rag constantly wet. We had to clean it thoroughly because the dough had to be put on the stoned floor of the oven. The dough itself it had to be a perfect consistency and in flawless condition so it would stay together after we laid on the flat stone surface. A metal plate—two feet by three feet—closed the opening of the furnace. In about two hours, we had 12 round loaves of Pteria-style bread. We knew the temperature of the furnace by experience. There were no temperature control gadgets. The first few years, we even had no electricity.

Now, I will tell you how to make yogurt; but, please, name it after my mother Maria (Marias) yogurt. First, you get one or two gallons of milk, depending how much yogurt you want to make. Also, get a small cup of plain yogurt. Start by putting your milk in a pot. Bring the milk to a boil. Then, turn off the heat, or move it off the stovetop. But, make sure, when the milk is boiling, so it does not spill, you watch and stay around. Milk has a sneaky way of spilling over the pot, and then you have a cleaning mess in your hands. You will think of Christos, when you do not watch it and it spills. After that, let it cool off. The best way to tell that it's cool enough is for to wait one hour or so after you take it out of the stove. Rather than waiting for it to come to room temperature, put your finger in the milk. If you can withstand the heat, counting for 10 seconds, it means it is ready to put three or four spoons of the plain yogurt into the boiled milk. Stir it thoroughly. I learned the finger temperature method from my mother and still use it today. Then put the pot at the corner of your kitchen counter, the top covered with three to four towels to keep it warm. In the morning, you will have your own homemade yogurt, Pteria-style. Now, if

you like your yogurts more sour, then, leave it outside of the refrigerator until noon the next day. Or, put it in the refrigerator first thing in the morning, if you like it normal. When I make my yogurt, I make it in small individual glass-top wares. That way, I can use it individually. You can cut your fruits in the yogurt. Put honey, nuts, whatever your heart desires—and have great healthy life.

In Pteria, as kids, we knew every home and how many cows they had, including their names. Speaking of cows, my grandfather John, my mother's father, had a special skill. When a cow grazes only on *trifily* (green clover in Greek), its stomach gets a tendency to blow up and it may die. The cows love that clover so much a person that is in charge of the herd has to be mindful of that all the time. A cow would leave a herd in a heartbeat for clover. My grandfather, as I recall, would take a hollow needle and go near a cow's spine somehow through the skin into the stomach, and get all the gasses out. He saved a lot of cows' lives in Pteria and the surrounding villages.

In the summers, at the end of the day, when the cows, bull, and oxen were coming home from grazing, all of us kids would be seated on the half-broken half-wire half-wood fence surrounding manure-packed back yards, and compete about who knew more cow and bull names, whose name it was, and who owned the largest bull. We felt so proud, knowing all their names. That commotion of cows coming home for the night was one of the evening's entertainment for all my friends Kosta, Giorgo, Antoni, Gianni, Michali, Voula, Danaee, Anoula, Illias, Kiriaki, Lazaros Pantelis, Kitsa, Kostantina, Celina, and Savvas, my sisters, my cousin Saitsa and her brother Kiriako, and me. By the end of the day, those cows were walking ever so slowly, on their uphill two-mile journey. The bells they had on their necks, different colors and sizes—that in itself was quite a scene. All of them together made an unbelievable sound, like an

orchestra playing different sounds every night for us. I can hear them now.

Sometimes, the cows that had young calves would leave the rest of the herd grazing and come straight home very early to feed, see, and lick their calves. It was impossible for the man who was in charge to stop those cows from leaving the herd.

Pteria was situated on a high mountain. Our home sat at the west side of the village. The lot size of our house was 50 feet by 850 feet. When you came in from the front, you opened a small gate door, you walked on multi-colored plaque stones—chamomile tea everywhere, roses, *molohe*s (hollyhock), and other varieties of flowers.

I especially loved that our garden was in the middle of all those flowers. It had everything. I mean everything you can imagine. Every day in the summer, my sister, Toula, and I would go in the garden, pick vegetables, and make fresh salads with olive oil, oregano, and vinegar.

The house had four rooms in total. When looking at the house from south to north, you will see a two-story house on the left side, one room on the first floor. That is where our wood-burning stove was and where all of our cooking took place, plus our kitchen table. That was the only room in the whole house, which had any kind of heat to keep us warm in the wintertime.

I remember my mother coming down in the mornings, on freezing cold days, trying to start a fire to warm up our room and our milk and to cook for the day. I remember the room my parents used upstairs had no heat whatsoever. Plus, the stairs that went up and down the house were on the outside. Instead of putting the stairs inside the home, the designer put them out side. It was designed that way in order to put there our two-story high wooden wheat and corn storage container to keep it safe and clean. So, the wooden storage took the place of the stairs in the middle of the house.

The stove was in the middle of two beds. One bed was used by my grandparents and the other by me. My uncle Apostoli used the room to the left, on the second floor, as a bedroom with no heat. On the right side the first floor room, we had our pots and pans, and a small pantry where we kept our olives, too. Also with no heat, on the second floor, was the other room my parents used—no heat, even in the brutal winters.

We kept our chopped wood in our hay barn in order to keep it dry. I helped chop wood as much as I could. Once a year, my father would take the wheat and corn to the watermill to be turned into flour. In return, they would keep some of it instead of us giving them money. We also fed our chickens wheat and corn. After the house, my father built a newer bread furnace. After that, he built a type of garage to put our tractor—no heat again. In the winters, the tractor was so frozen I could not even touch it. Plus, we had to empty all the fluids from it too. Until April, the tractor was useless. It could not be started—in any shape or form.

We had the best two quince trees. Quince used to grow to half a pound each. It was very tasty. It is my favorite fruit. It has a sweet and sour taste. My mouth always gets watery—every time I think about it. We had two plum trees—red and white—and two huge nuts trees. All of our trees were the envy of Pteria.

The barn with our cows was after the garage. The barn had only one window, facing west, and one door, facing south. After the cow barn was our chicken coop. It had one small window facing west, and one door facing south. It had one built-in wooden platform for the cows to sleep on, and small stairs for them to walk onto the platform. And, if, at any time, someone forgot to close the coop, 100% sure we would be woken up in the middle of the night by the chickens. Foxes or weasels used to come and kill and terrorize them. Another family forgot to close the back window of the barn.

The wolves came in and killed two of its cows and two horses. This incident took place in the winter months.

After our chicken coop was our hay barn, which had a life of its own. It was built just about 25 feet southwest of the chicken coop. The entire hay barn was built with filbert wood sticks. It had thousands of holes through the walls. Only the roof was built with hay, so no rain could get in there. Our hay barn was a different story all together. That's where most of our chickens lay their eggs. Plenty of times, we were not able to find the eggs for six months or more. The eggs got so rotten. It is not funny describing that.

In a special building on a four-foot high wooden platform, we kept our homemade wine in two wooden barrels. Every year, we made white and red. I think the wine of the muscatel grapes is the best.

We also kept there our chopped wood, our pickled green tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, and pig lard. In the pig lard, we kept our pig meat. If you want to keep meat for a whole year, keep it in clay made containers, covered completely with lard. It lasts for a whole year or more, with no preservatives added.

On the western side of our hay barn was one of our neighbor's hay barn. His name was Tingiris. His wife's name was Soumela.

After that was about 600' of straight land to the west. Our street went through that. Plus, we used it as playground. The street went southwest to five more homes and stopped. But, after the 600 feet, there was a steep downhill. About two miles, at the end of the downhill was the main road—the only road with asphalt pavement. After that were the mountains—where the main road continued uphill into four more villages. The names of the four villages at the top of those mountains were Akontio, Chionato, Komninades, and Dipotamia. Then there are the borders of a different country

called Albania. At the edge of the 600' of straight land, the Greek army had built a one-room barrack, so one can see downhill and across the mountains. At this small playground, we played all kinds of games. Sometimes when we saw in the far distant horizon an airplane with a long smoke tail behind it, all of us would stop our game, look at the long tail—mesmerized—and say “Wow, the Americans launched another rocket into space.”

Then we would resume our games, and do not think about it. We invented some of our own games, and some we learned from our parents. One was tselinga, another koutrontenekes, and a third rigalo. And, of course, soccer. Those were our summer games. In the wintertime, we played board games—three of them. We played those games with beans or corn of different colors to separate the opponents. The first we called eniari—the second rabbits and dogs. And, of course, backgammon.

Personally, I think there should be a movie made out of my life. It will be best movie ever.

In 1972, my parents moved to another village closer to Kastoria. The village was called Mesopotamia.

Even though Pteria is only 40 minutes by car from Kastoria, Mesopotamia is 20 minutes. Mesopotamia is 20 minutes east of Pteria. In order to go from Pteria to Mesopotamia, which is somewhat downhill, one passes another village called Kalohori. After driving east on the asphalt-paved main street and five minutes after passing Kalohori, on the left is Mesopotamia. Both villages are built in the middle of the valley. After Mesopotamia is Kolokithou. Right after another bridge over the same river that comes around Pteria, is the village called Maniaki. Then two miles downhill, on is in my lovely Kastoria. One of the best places from which to view and admire this city is Maniaki, right before descending. Here—right before your eyes, the gorgeous bride of the north, the famous

Kastoria, the city built in the middle of lake—is the capital of the fur world—fur country.

All the time we lived in Pteria, the fur business was great. Some families from Pteria worked and lived in Kastoria, coming back only on weekends. They did that because there was no daily transportation to Kastoria or at least not a convenient one.

My mother's brother Haralampo was already in Germany as a master furrier. He talked to me about the business when I was even six to seven years old. He came from Germany with his big car on his summer vacations. All of Pteria waited for his arrival. He brought many presents.

I remember distinctly one of those summers when he came to Pteria. I was about four years old. He had brought a camera with him and taken a picture—black and white, of course—in front of my house with my grandmother Savvato and my aunt Maria. This is the only picture I have when I was a kid and remember perfectly, every moment—like a movie—of how the whole process took place. It took us about 10 minutes to take that picture. My grandmother said, “Christos has no shoes. Even our shoes are not in good shape. What are we going to do? We are so poor.”

We were thinking about which way to go about it. Finally, my uncle said, “Let's hide his feet behind the chamomile tea flowers.” He then took my picture. As he was leaving, he said, “I will send shoes to you.” Then, he took me by my hand, and we went looking for my sister Toula. We found her playing at our playground behind our hay barn. He took one more picture of me together with my sister. But, because there were no chamomile tea flowers to hide our feet, this time we borrowed Savvas' shoes to take the picture. You can see in that picture too. Those shoes had holes in them. But, who cared anyway? I did not, for sure. I was happier walking around without shoes any way.

We rented a house in Mesopotamia. By the way, at the age of 14 years old, my father bought me my first bicycle ever. It was red in color. Later, I learned, that, at Mesopotamia, Mr. Evangelos Christopoulos, his wife Eleni, daughter Olga, and son Vassili, let us live free at their house, so we could take care of it. His parents had already passed, and he just wanted the house to be occupied. I guess it was a win-win situation for all of us. Plus, he had rabbits in his barn. Because he was so busy with his fur manufacturing business and his family all lived in Kastoria any way, he put me in charge of taking care of them. That included their daily feeding of dry clove, green lettuce, and carrots, giving them clean water, and cleaning the barn. I loved every one of those rabbits. They were multi-colored. I was in love with some of their eyes. They were so colorful—like I never saw before at any time in my life. I used to sit there for hours and watched their very pleasant view—even how they ate. It was so cute to watch. If you have a chance in your busy life, make sure to visit one place that they raise rabbits. You will think of me, and be in my thoughts and place.

I was so proud of myself. I walked around feeling as tall as the tallest chestnut tree in all of Pteria. By the way, that is tall! “Someone trusted me,” I said to myself. “Someone trusted me with something, to be in charge. I felt a sense of responsibility and accomplishment. Every time, I opened the barn door, some of the rabbits would come around me. Some of them would come to me and eat from my hands. Some of them would tap their tails on to the ground and go in their tunnels. I would stay there for hours sometimes and pet them. It was quite a scene. After one year, I asked Mr. Evangelos, and he gave one pair of rabbits. He brought them to Pteria to my grandparents’ house John and Paraskevi. I loved those rabbits too much, and wanted them to grow and have more of them. So, I talked my grandfather into taking care of them in Pteria, because, now, I was living in Mesopotamia and only went back to Pteria on weekends.

So, I could not take care of them myself on a daily basis.

The rabbit population of Pteria exploded. My grandparents loved them and took care of those rabbits in a great fashion. They roamed everywhere. I was so proud of myself with what I was accomplishing with my rabbits. They became more and more, digging tunnels everywhere. It even looked comical at times. It was like playing hide-and-seek with them.

In the meantime my grandfather Haralampos had passed and my grandmother Savvato went to live in Toronto with my father's brother Apostolis, his wife Voula, and their kids—my first cousins—Haralampos, Savvato, and Sofia.

In 1975, my mother and my sister Despina came to Chicago to one of my mother's brothers—the older one Giorgos, who also had blue eyes, like my mother, and their other brother Haralampos, who still lives in Germany. My mother has four brothers, Giorgos, Leonidas, Haralampos, and Anastasios and one sister named Despina. My uncle Giorgo, his wife Eleftheria, and their kids Kostas, Anastasia, and John all came to the United States in 1958. I remember, at later times, when my uncle wanted to talk to his father at Pteria. That was a unique adventure by itself, because there was only one telephone in the whole village. My uncle would call from Chicago, let's say at two p.m. and say to the people who had the phone, "Mr. Anastasios Karasavidis, please go find my father. I will call back in three hours."

The family that had the telephone, then, would go and search for my grandfather, wherever he was—at a farm, a different village, or in Kastoria. Then, my grandfather would come and wait until my uncle called back. Sometimes my uncle would say he would call tomorrow at the same time and tell the people who had the phone to tell my father to be there at that particular time. That is how we communicated.

When we moved to Mesopotamia, I started telling my mother that I wanted to become a furrier. She always told me no and no. It is very hard to learn. I would have to sew thousands of seams on the machine every day in my life, and I was not going to like it. She used to say, in order to create an art you have to love it. The more I heard the word machine and art, the more I loved it. I think this is the only time my mother was wrong. I think she thought for sure I would become a comedian. I was and still am a great comedian, jokester, great dancer, and big music lover. Life is great. Just try your best to surround yourself with people that have imagination, truth, creativity, care, meaning, passion for themselves and humanity, trust, humility, some adventure, respect, and, above all, love for others without expectations. And, do not try to convince people to love you in any shape or form. Instead, you should try to convince them to leave you. The ones that stay are for sure the ones who will love you forever. Do not try to squeeze a seat next to somebody if they love you. They will make room for you by themselves. My mother did not think that I had the passion for the art of fur. She wanted me to take my other passion to become a comedian. I love comedy. I was great at that. Or, she wanted me to take a different profession in my life all together. I never asked her that. I also never said this ever to anybody. First time I ever said it is in my book, that I wanted to become like my uncle Haralampos in Germany. He had passion about the fur business; and so, I was determined to become not only a furrier, but also the master fur artist of the world. And, if I can bring God into my life, he has ways of doing things for us, and he did for me.

Do not become what someone says you must. Become what you love and want.

So now, I tell everybody, "Do not become what your parents tell you. But, listen to their advice. Do not become what society pushes you to become. Otherwise, the market place determines you, or a company that needs to fill job

positions with great rewards, or because the money is great. The best thing to do in your life is doing what you love, and 90% of your life's problems are solved right there. A large percentage of the world's population today lives where their jobs are, not where they really want and love to live. So do what you love and you can live where you want to live. When you discover what it is that you love, you will be very successful, and I do not mean monetarily only either. Please do not think that somebody is successful based on the wealth they have accumulated. I think success is measured by how excited you are with what it is you are doing on a daily basis, the fulfillment you get at the end of your day, closeness to your immediate family and your extended one, the people around you every day, and the very fact that you can sleep within 10 minutes when you go to bed at night. Now that is BIG.

What you love comes from within you, and nobody can step on it, or take it from you. Whatever comes from your heart is an indomitable spirit. It will guide you without your even knowing you are being guided. Whatever it is you want to do in your life, always ask yourself, "Is that me? Is that what will make me happy, excited, when I get up every morning, will represent me on this earth? Is that what I will be known for? Is that what I believe? Is that the legacy I want to leave behind? Remember, it can be fantastic only when something represents you and comes from your heart. Remember in your life, you come first. So, it is an expression and extension of yourself when you do what you love. Others cannot only see it, but can also sense it. Remember to give your hand to others, without harming yourself. That is the only way we will create a strong human chain for our future. Remember you have only one shot at this world. So please aim very, very well.

Remember every so often, somebody comes along with an idea that the world, on a certain date, will come to an end. Please do not get distracted with this kind of talk, for this simple reason. The end of the world is coming for some

of us every day. When a person dies, right there is the end of the world for him or her, not for all of us. Remember, not to get off balance from your beliefs.

Remember, we humans can only act and respond with our five senses, of which every human has the same number. Nobody has a sixth sense. We are not different. Remember, success in life is doing what you love and how to refine that love in school.

Let's say, you love peeling potatoes in a restaurant. If that's what you want to do and that's what makes you happy, that is all that should matter to you. You can peel potatoes with artistry. You can break the record of the fastest potato peeler in the world. You can create art with potatoes nobody else can think of creating. That art comes from your heart. God gives it to you. You and only you can peel potatoes and give them a distinctively artistic shape, each one different from the other, and sell them to restaurants, for example, as the ultimate handcrafted art-shaped French fries in the world.

You and only you can have in your heart what God gave you—to bring your art out for others to see and be mesmerized. Our brain is petty—much like a piece of meat. But, look at what a brain is capable of doing.

Look at our body—so many thousands of functions working together—like a harmonious orchestra—and you do not hear a sound. Now that's what I call art. Remember, God only builds masterpieces called humans.

And, please, in your lifetime DO NOT give any human a hard time until you have raised one yourself. Then you will understand why.”

Kastorias' lake is called Orestiada. It has a lot of fish and all kinds of birds and ducks, geese, and other birds that migrate all the way to Africa for the wintertime, like the storks for example. Only the swans stay all year around. Kastoria is the capital of the fur world. Kastoria is the state

with the capital Kastoria. Kastoria means beaver. It got the name from the beavers that live at the lake. The state is located at the most northwestern part of Greece. The fur business started there years ago because you guessed it, beavers—the town itself Kastoria is built in the middle of the lake. It is like a peninsula. A road goes around the city's lakeshore drive. A great hospital has been built at the south end of that lakeshore drive. There are lots of restaurants, nightlife, and plenty of five-star hotels. You can go into the city from only one place.

When I left Kastoria, it had only one traffic light, and every storefront sign was in English. The city also has ancient buildings and churches from the Byzantine Empire in the 1400s. One can visit and really admire the architecture of that time, and even some home designs from that era can be seen and admired. Some of the churches are still in operation. At some of them, one can still see paintings on the outside walls.

Also, the best white giant beans in the world are grown there. Really, they are known worldwide for their great taste—a taste like you never had. I like them cooked in the oven, in a big pan, in Greek virgin olive oil, with a red sauce, oregano, and basil. “It is perfect,” I say.

Again, the main business is the fur business. If you have any connection with the fur world, everybody knows that Kastoria was, is, and will continue to be the capital of the fur-manufacturing world. When somebody asks where you are from, if you reply, from Kastoria, they do not ask you what your profession is. It is known—automatically. You are a furrier artist. It is something that is born inside you. The art and design that comes out of that town and state is mind-boggling. They have now their own mink farms. Mink are raised with the utmost respect for the animals. They have to be well fed, and they have stress-free lives. Fish is a great mink food. The fish is the great dye for the mink. The art starts right there.

Again, art comes from your heart and no power can stop it. People from all over the world go to Kastoria to buy their dream garment—tourists from Russia Poland, Germany, Austria Holland China, the U. S., England, Italy, Ukraine, Serbia, and Lithuania. Very much the whole world travels there.

In 1974, I was 13 years old. I started working for Mr. Evangelos. My goal was to learn to become great and someday give back to humanity the way I wanted to. The buildings were right in front of the lakeshore drive, just about 80 feet from the lake. They were built like the Greek capital letter pee (in Greek, Π). They were in mixed-use shops and condos. I worked on the fourth floor and at 12 noon every day, I mean every day, I had to go out to bring fresh bread from the bakery to the Evangelos family that lived one floor above the shop. They gave me only half an hour to go out. In that half hour, I had to fight the crowds at the bakery, because everybody went out to get their fresh bread at the same time. Every day in Greece, people eat fresh bread. After I brought their bread, I had to go back out again to the restaurant so I could eat myself, and then come back to work on time. In the shop were working Giannis Karpozilos, Alekos Karpozilos, and their sister Soumela Karpozilos—super great people. Both brothers were Green Beret and parachutists, when they were in the army. Also working in the shop were the brothers-in-law of Mr. Evangelos, other coworkers, Stathis, Efthimios, Vassilios, Panayiotis, and Nikos, and four others.

The more I wanted to sew the more apart I was from sewing. That went on for four months. Finally, Gianni prepared a machine for me to learn how to sew. Gianni was also the manager. He said to me, “Christo two hours a day only, you are going to sit on the machine; but you are going to sew without a needle. You have to run newspapers through the machine—no fur.”

“No fur,” I replied. I kind of stood there speechless. I said to me, “No fur—how can that be called sewing.”

Nevertheless, Gianni had me sit on the machine and run newspapers through the wheels of the machine. Now, I was very innocent. The sharp teeth of the wheels cut the paper, and I was afraid to tell that to Gianni little that I knew. Eventually, one guy quit and, finally, Gianni said, “Okay, Christo, now we will teach you.”

I started sewing what it is called pieces or sections. I was in heaven. I loved every second of that time. I was doing my cross every morning before I started working. I was great at it. I was so into it I did not even want to clean the machine at times, or oil it, which we had to do every morning before we began our days. Soon, I started not to go for bread anymore. Mr. Evangelos went to New York once a year to buy fur sections, also called pieces. When he came back, we all looked at him with a wow. He went to New York. “Oh, my God,” we thought. “He did business. He brought back fur pieces so we could work. Wow.” It was a big deal for all of us that he could do that.

He would go for about one month at a time. Then, Vassilios and Efthimios would do all the color coordination. First, they sorted out all those thousands of pieces, broken down to about fifteen different color shades or more sometimes, under special ultra violet lights, matching everything to perfection. They then weighed all those pieces and put the pieces onto two sheets of newspapers—the left and the right side. Then we, the operators, would sew those pieces together into fifty or thirty inch long strips, depending on the desirable length, putting these long strips together and together again until we made a big section, called plates. It is equivalent almost to that of a queen-sized bed sheet. After that, Mr. Evangelos sold all those plates to the U.S., Germany, Russia, and Italy—any country for that matter. Then, those plates were turned into garments. I was excited about sewing what is called a

section. I was content with everything I was involved with. Every day, I got better, and better—and faster. I got started being paid about \$100 a week.

A girl named Dafni Christopoulos lived in one of the apartments. Her father had a large company called Dauits—a three-floor fur manufacturing facility with big heavy contracts from Germany—they were saying at the shop. Ironically, my mother worked for Dafni's father, Tasos Christopoulos, right before she left for Chicago. Dafni was my girlfriend—teenager stuff, of course. Aleko and others made fun of me about having a girlfriend whose father had a lot of money and did not like me. She was the only daughter in that family. I was a kid, did not care either way. Plus, I was coming to the U. S. to become an artist. That was most important for me than anything else. The guys teased me about that any way and had fun with it. I was a carefree kid. Things of that nature did not bother me. I had my own dreams and inspirations. Dafni had black hair shoulder length, she was 5' 2" tall very beautiful, spontaneous, energetic, and a jokester. She was great in school, too. A very smart teenager told me, "It is better to have one friend with high values than a lot of friends with no values."

In 1976, my father came to Chicago to my mother and sister Debbie. That was just about one year, more or less, after my mother and sister had already left. I was left back alone to take care of my sister Toula and myself. I was 15 years old. When my father left, I moved to a suburb of Kastoria to a one-room apartment. My sister was in the first year of high school. In the U.S., that is considered tenth grade. That's how it is called there. I rented an apartment for her at Nestorio so she could attend school. Nestorio is a town also built on a high mountain about one hour and thirty minutes west from Kastoria by bus. I was in charge of her rent, personal expenses, and chopped wood for winter. I rented a truck to deliver the wood. Again, there were only

wood-burning stoves for heat at wintertime. I felt great for myself. I felt as a protector of my sister.

I never, I mean, never had a fight or argument about material possession with my sisters, my mother and father or any of our extended family. To us, that's all secondary. It does not represent our family values. It is against our upbringing to argue about that, or any other situation with my sisters—even after we were in the states already.

About drinking or doing drugs—my father or mother never told us don't do it. It was a given thing in our family automatically not to do it.

My sister and I came on the weekends to Pteria to our grandparents. I lived in a suburb of Kastoria called Ntailaki—just about fifteen minutes from my work on busy mornings. When you open the door looking west, just one bed was placed in the northwest corner of this one-room apartment in which I lived. I used the same sheets for the whole year. The walls were just of cement—no paint of any color on the walls, no running water or a sink, no closet, no mirror. I wore the same clothing for the whole week, until we got back to Pteria, where our grandmother hand washed our clothing. Even though there was only a bed in this one-room apartment, again, that did not bother me, in the least. I was very happy. The toilet I used was about 50 feet outside with metal sheets on the roof, which had a lot of holes. When it rained, the water dripped everywhere. It was a nightmare to say the least. I had to think 10 times before I use it. It was not a pretty sight, and no place to be especially on cold, rainy, and freezing days. The freezing rain dripped all over my body, too. I had to share the toilet with 10 other individuals, who shared the same apartment complex and no shower of any sort. In order to take shower, I had to go and use the public showers in Kastoria once a week, usually Fridays, right before I took the bus for Pteria.

At the shop, the guys always talked about the public

showers. I should be careful about their cleanliness because they were unsanitary to use, and so forth and so on. Plus, a lot of weird things went on. And, so it goes. One Friday afternoon, I was tired in the shower, and I decided to sit down on the floor. After a month or so, I had lice all over. I did not know what to do. So, I told the guys at the shop my dilemma. First, they did not believe me. I had to show them one walking around. They advised me the best thing to do was to shave everywhere and use lots of soap, or go to the doctor. After that, there was very friendly teasing about my dilemma, while having fun with it the same time.

At the shop, we used to talk petty much about everything, but mostly about army adventures Aleko, Gianni, Panayioti, Vassili, and others had. We also talked about songs, about Pontos our lost country, about movies, especially Clint Eastwood cowboy movies. Gianni was the one who loved movies the most. We all liked Bruce Lee movies. We talked lot about girls and some politics. Overall, I had a great time learning about everything in life and, especially, about common sense. We talked a lot—mostly about American movies and, in the end, the results were that, in America, there was a lot of money to be made, a lot of killings, big cars, big cigars, and a lots of rockets—all said in that order.

I recall now that my grandmother Paraskevi had a picture of the two Kennedy presidents. Their faces were on a towel, and she had that towel hanging on the wall. I believe that my uncle Haralampo brought it from Germany during one of his summer vacations to Greece. But, for some strange reason, nobody in the shop or at Pteria believed me that I was going to Chicago, even after my father was there already. I could not understand why they had that feeling.

And, so, my weekends continued at Pteria with my sister. In addition, with my friends Giorgo and Kosta and my other friends from Mesopotamia, Simos Meimaridis and Dimitrios Poumparis, on weekends, we went from village to village

dancing our Pontian dances at parties or picnics. I love to dance. I can have a quiet conversation with great company. It could be any place, and my ear can pick up the music sounds a mile away, so to speak.

My grandfather and grandmother were excellent people. My grandparents raised cows, pigs, and rabbits. We had a donkey. It was very short and his woofs grew crooked. It was the only donkey with that problem in the whole village. It seemed to me they were growing so fast. I always told and reminded my grandfather to cut them, because it could not walk normal. I felt so sorry for it. My grandfather was a skinny, tall man with a hooked nose, a very respectful person with anybody he came into contact.

He told me, "Christo, in your life you can only save money when you have it. If you do not have it, the savings are automatic. You cannot save something when you do not have it. And with money," he said, using his right hand, "For example," and I quote, "if your hand is as tight as a fist, the money does not stay in your hand. If your hand is completely open, the money will fall through your fingers. You have to have your hand open just enough so the money, when it comes, some of it can stay in your hand. "*Pan metron ariston*," he said all the time.

He taught us common sense. He taught us to respect anybody that visited our home in Pteria. As kids, we had to get up from our seats, open the door, welcome them at home, kiss their hands, and offer them a seat. Also, if a visitor spent the night, my *giagia* (grandmother in Greek) washed their feet for the night as a sign of respect. There was no shower at home. We had to warm up the water on our wood-burning stove, always offer our seats to a pregnant woman, a war veteran, and a blind person, and ask them if they needed any additional help of any sort. That way, we extended our help to them, to a person that was crippled and an elderly person.

By the way, I do not call people old. I call them walking libraries. There is no word old in my vocabulary. When experience and strength are put together, perfection is created. Plus, use common sense.

My grandparents went through two world wars—World War I, when they were about 12 years old, and the second world war in 1940 when Germany invaded Greece—and the Greek civil war that preceded that. My grandmother was a heavy-set woman with long hair. She always wore a scarf on her head—winters and summers. I was always amazed with her. At any given moment, she could put food together on the table—like lightning. It did not matter what we had at home. She would cook so fast, and the food was great. Plus, on top of these things, we had no refrigerator. Sometimes, she pointed out to me which chicken she would like to cook for a particular holiday, or if someone were sick. For some reason she thought chicken soup and chicken with lemon and potatoes in the oven were the cures for everything. She knew all her chickens, one by one. After all, she put together all the eggs and how many for each chicken to sit on and incubate (in Pteria, incubation is known as *to klossisi*). She knew which one laid eggs, which one not, and how old they were.

I would catch the one she pointed out to me. The first time I did, it was an adventure. She said, “You are going to put your one foot on her wings, the other foot on its feet, then you slaughter it.” She left me alone the first time, and the chicken got away from me. I tried to catch it. You are talking about a mess everywhere. After that, she did it a few times, teaching me until she said, “Now you can do it by yourself.”

We used the feathers from our chickens to fill all our pillows—great, great stuff. We did not waste anything. Also, every year, we raised our own pigs and used their meat all winter long.

Working at the Siziadis buildings for Mr. Evangelos, I wanted to impress my father and show him how well I sewed, did color coordination, and nailed all the fur plates (as it is called). Finally, I felt great with my performance. So, I decided to take a picture and send it to my father in Chicago. When you look at the picture, to my left is Gianni, who cannot be seen clearly. By the way, that is the only picture I have working at Kastoria. I took it just to show my father how proud I was sewing.

I also tried to go and learn how to do *let out* sewing. (*Let out* sewing is a process for lengthening a fur garment.) That is the high end of sewing and more expensive workmanship.

I tried two places, but they did not hire me, for only four months. That was my remaining time I had left to stay in Greece. I wanted to learn how to do *let out* sewing not just the sections that I was doing.

In spring of 1977, my sister Toula and I went to Thessaloniki. It is the biggest city in northern Greece. The city is named after the sister of Alexander the Great. My sister and I sat at the consulate office in Thessaloniki. On the wall, there was a picture showing two round buildings and the marina towers. The bottom of that picture said Chicago in big capital letters. I whispered to Toula, "Do you believe that. That is where we are going."

We got all are necessary papers done. We went and did all the preparation check with doctors and went back to Kastoria after two days. For some reason, still, no friends believed I was going to America. But, I knew in my heart I was going, and that was very exciting for me.

Just like that, on early September of 1977, my sister and I landed at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. It was raining so hard that night when we landed that I could not even see out of the window. I wanted to see so badly. All I was thinking was, "My God, this is my first time in Chicago

and in America. Why can I not see outside?”

I had a little secret in my heart, I was hoping that Chicago it would be flat land, not like Pteria, and my hope came true, thank God. My mother came with my sister Despina to pick us up from the airport, with the next-door neighbor's son and his car. My family did not own a car yet. They took public transportation everywhere. My parents lived at Fullerton and Kimball Avenues, on the southwest corner in Chicago, right above a privately owned pharmacy store. It was a multi-unit building, half brick and half wood. Across the street was a Jack-in-the-Box fast food restaurant, plus, a Greek-American grocery store called Brilakis Foods. Just east of us about one block was a Greek movie theater. My cousins, Gus, Stacy, and John, my mother's older brother, George, and his wife Eleftheria lived about five blocks north of us on Kimball Avenue. My English was non-existent as was that of my parents. Only Despina spoke English. She had been here already three years, and she was going to school.

After one week or so cooped up in the house, I was ready to start what I love. This time I was thinking, “Christo, now, you will continue your art in in Chicago—the best place to be. Here is your chance to become the best.”

I used to say to myself, “Christo, now, you are in America. You are here now. Live your dream to become what you love.”

My mother was already working in downtown Chicago at Evans Furs, the largest furrier in the world at 36 South State Street in Chicago. She introduced me to Petros Gelastopoulos and Lakis Kolias—the two best fur operators in North America—really the best. They worked at 190 North State Street in Chicago, where the ABC channel seven is located. My mother and I walked from Fullerton and Kimball to Diversey and Kimball, the Logan Square area, to catch the C.T.A. (Chicago Transit Authority) train going downtown. She said, “Logan Square is a brown stop.

After the train goes up and then down again in the tunnel, you have to get off at the blue stop. That is called Washington.”

That is how I knew how to go to work. Get on the brown station and get off on the blue station. And, little did I know, Petros and Lakis were waiting for me, already, because there was a shortage of furriers in Chicago. They could not get anybody to come and sew. Nobody was interested in sitting on the machine, sewing all day long, every day.

To make a mink coat, you need about 10,000 stitches or so. I will talk about this later.

At, 190 North State Street, Chicago, Illinois

The building, also known as the State and Lake building, where the ABC channel seven is now located, right across, on the north side of the building is the famous Chicago theater. Right next to the theater was a restaurant with the best corn beef sandwich in the world, at least for me. It was, I mean, the best. They gave a whole can of soda, fries, and the corned beef sandwich, which would melt in my mouth. It was so tender—the best I ever had. Another restaurant was right under the 190 North State building, run by a Greek gentleman, Jimmy Fountalas—a fantastic cook—great food, especially the famous Greek soup he made.

All of the first four floors of the 190 North State building were filled with furriers. It was the fur-manufacturing center of the Midwest, with workshops, retailers, wholesalers, pattern making, hardware suppliers, finishers, and fur and leather boutiques. And, right above them, was ABC Channel 7.

I got a job at the third floor, working for a gentleman named Mike Battista—my first boss in USA. A tall healthy looking Italian gentleman, he was the fur artist. Petros and Lakis were the operators, the *let out* sewers. They were doing exactly what I wanted to do at Kastoria right before I came

here in the States—the famous *let out* sewing work that I wanted to learn.

I started working in the second week I came to Chicago, and even though I was expert at sewing, for two full years, I was mostly doing cutting and putting the pelts together, and some of the *let out* sewing on the sleeves and collars. Petros always used to say to me, “Christo, I am shocked and surprised that you never cut yourself after all the cutting you are doing every day with a fur knife.”

They never let me use a scissors. Petros and I went out for lunch at least once a week. He introduced me to all kinds of different ethnic restaurants and foods. I think he felt kind of proud of himself that he knew more things than I did, and that he could show me around—great guy.

There was an array of international restaurants. For some strange reason, I could not get used to the smell of the food and water—even at our home or out. Everywhere I went, the food had some type of smell to it. I cannot describe it. I would venture to say that it was very bad. It took me about two months or so to get used to the smells. It was so bad. At times, I wanted to go back to Kastoria. My mother and father used to say, “Be patient, *pedi mou* (my son in Greek).”

After a month or so of going back and forth to work, I started getting used to the trains started, and getting a little brave. If, sometimes, I could not get my mother to meet me, so we can go home together, it started not to bother me too much. One evening, in early November, at 5:30 pm, in the heart of the rush hour, I walked to the train station. I got on my train, just like any other day. At the next station, either someone jumped or was pushed in front of a train. I could not tell. He went through the glass. Half of his body was in the train. The other half was hanging outside—pieces of glass, blood—everywhere. Because I was somewhat still afraid, I always got into the first vestibule so, I could get out first and get home fast.

At this moment, first thing I said to myself, “Christo, do not cry.” After that first moment, my little Pteria came to my mind—like a lightning strike—all my friends, my grandparents. All I thought was, “Oh, my God, the killing has begun. The killing has started—just like we said back in Kastoria at the fur shop—a lot of killings in America.”

I was like a little scared deer in a jungle. I was kind of speechless, and shocked. I could not talk to anybody.

The train stopped completely. The police came, the fire department, and an ambulance. Now at this point, I do not know one word of English. I am holding onto my pole very tight, watching the whole scene unfolding in front of me. After one hour or so, some of the people got out of the train, but some had stay back. I was so anxious to go home I decided to stay too. After who knows how long, finally, the train took off and passed the Logan Square station, my favored brown station at which I got on and off the train. Then I started to cry. I said, “Oh, my God, now what! All I was thinking was how to tell my mother where I was. I could not read or speak, and the train continued nonstop all the way to the end of the line, which, at that time, was the Jefferson Park station. I am sure that the conductor said this train would go to the end of the line nonstop, for some more police work. But, who knew? Who could tell me that!

At this point, I stopped crying, and said to myself, “Okay, Christo. Let’s see how you are going to go back.”

And, so, I took the train on the opposite side of the track. The train passed the Belmont stop, which was the same color as the Logan Square stop. I said, “Oh, my God, it passed my stop again.”

But, Belmont was only a B stop. The Logan Square stop was an A and B stop. So, the next stop was my stop. I got off the train and walked home faster than I had ever walked before.

I could have called my mother. But, the problem was that I did not know where I was. I could not read the signs. So, I, finally, got home about nine that evening.

I talked to my parents and sisters about the whole adventure. They comforted me the best they could. But, still, the rest of the evening I had strange, mixed emotions—very bad feelings. It was a big adventure for me—something that I never experience before, only talked about it.

I stayed home all the rest of that week. Again, I thought very much about going back to my Pteria and Kastoria—or—stay and continue my dream of becoming a fur artist. After that week, I decided to stay and continue going back and forth to work with my mother.

I also loved listening to the radio, especially talk shows on many kinds of subjects. It was very bad. It was terrible. It was frustrating for me that, every time, I turned the radio on, I did not understand anything the radio was saying. I used to say to myself, “Do not worry, Christo. There will be a day you will turn this radio dial on, and understand everything they say and are talking about. Just be patient and thank God.”

I slowly started meeting all the other furriers in the building, and sewing for Mike Battista, and for other fur manufactures, like Gus Pappas, George Polikandriotis, Mr. Lederman, Mr. Simon, Mr. Bill Tivers, and others. They used to leave me the key. I stayed late in the evenings, sewing, doing *let out* work with mink, raccoons beaver—all types of furs. For me, the king of furs is mink.

In 1979, my mother father and I all worked for Garber furs at 679 North Michigan Avenue in Chicago. I did sewing, joining fur coats, leather repairs, new zippers, cleaning, glazing, and nailing pelts and garments, adjusting patterns, matching colors, and textures of hair length.

All furs are not worked the same. Raccoons and foxes are worked differently. I learned how, from one left half pelt, to create a right one too. I was always fascinated and admired master furriers when they put a tape measure on their neck and went to the showroom to measure clients. I watched the whole process, and said to myself, "Someday, Christo, you will be putting the same tape measure on your neck."

What a wonderful thing to do. What a special feeling that is—just to be able to walk around with a tape measure on my neck—knowing that I deserve it—to have it hanging, like I know what to do with that. Sometimes, when I worked alone, I would put a tape measure on me, look in the mirror, but take it off right away, and say to myself, "Christo, it looks great on your body. But, you do not deserve it yet—having a tape hang on your neck. You do not know enough to wear that." I would take it off right away and continue my sewing, with great respect for everybody that wore that tape before me and after me—professionalism.

My father did *let out* work. He was fast. I mean fast. Some days, he could sew two pelts in one hour. That is very fast. Later on, he invented an air gauge that blew the hair so it was easier and faster to sew. Even Mr. Rubin was amazed with my father's ingenuity. Garber Furs had a German master fur artist name Rubin and a fur lady Zingret. We all learned a lot about fur artistry from them—great artists and personalities.

We learned the English language from talking with them at work. I went to Truman College and took English courses.

At Garber Furs, there were other master furriers working on a part-time basis. They had retired in Florida and came back for six months only to work for the season.

In 1981, I went to work for Mrs. Berman and her two sons at 612 North Michigan Avenue in Chicago. At

Michigan Avenue and Ohio Street, mastering what I love, I did *let out* work on mink, beaver, raccoon, Russian sable, and chinchilla, fittings, and some pattern work. I worked some evenings for a gentleman named Joe Moss on 50 East Oak Street in Chicago—not only a great fur artist, but, very fast on figuring jobs, time cost, and how to do the best workmanship. He was very colorful gentleman. A lot of the Playboy models were his clients.

In the meantime, my father was the disciplinarian. He said no car; so, we never owned one. We saved our money so we could open our own store someday.

I remember, one sunny Saturday afternoon, the whole family went grocery shopping at Dominick's. After we got on the bus in Park Ridge, Illinois, on Cumberland Avenue, going north bound, the bus driver stepped on the brakes so suddenly and so hard, that all our tomatoes and apples wound up all over the bus. Guess, who had to get up, and pick them up from the floor between the people's feet, and say excuse me to everyone? Me!

The same year, after working late at Western Avenue and Foster in Chicago, I was standing at a bus stop, the weather below zero, after rain and sleet all day, keeping myself moving so I wouldn't freeze. It was eight p.m. or so. I was waiting for a bus at the northeast corner to go west. Here came a mature lady (a walking library) driving her Cadillac. A small white dog with all kinds of frou-frous ribbons everywhere at its neck and tail was lying on the back seat of that warm cozy car. As soon as they stopped right in front of me, the little white dog started barking at me. At that moment, a weird feeling went through my whole body. I stood there speechless, did not know what to say or think until I got home and said to my father, "This year, we are getting a car." And a car I did buy, a used one, front wheel drive, maroon Cadillac Eldorado, just like we talked about in Kastoria—big cars in America. By the way, I was 21 years

old when I learned how to drive and bought my first car.

I had one week of vacation that summer. I told my father I wanted go to work at something else for that week. I got a job at a fruit market store in Chicago. My father said it is not such great idea for me. He said no. "You will be tired. You will not like it."

In any case, I did it. Just as my father had predicted, I worked there for only three days. When I went back on Friday to be paid, the owner said to me, "The days that you worked count for the days you did not work, and so I do not owe you any money." And, he did not pay me. That was the end of my one- week vacation that year.

In 1982, I went to work for the company, N. H. Rosenthal Furs at 940 North Michigan Avenue in Chicago. I worked with a master fur artist, Rubin—truly a master, and learned a lot about redesign, making soft shoulders on garments, remodeling, repairing the correct way, upsizing patterns, and fittings. I also worked on leather making and replacing turned panels, making new coats in variety of different styles, and sales. Wonderful place to work—very spectacular people—the owners, Mrs. Cooper as everybody called her, and her son Skip Weldfeld—very, very good people, and great furriers.

In 1984, I went to work for Maple Furriers in Oak Park, Illinois for Mr. Marty Silverman, a master furrier, learning and mastering all the things I loved doing, including fittings and management. Once a year, he would invite all of the employees to his house for a swimming pool party. It was the highlight of my summer.

I also worked for Thorpe Furs at Evanston, Illinois. Plus, I did quality control, merchandizing, fittings, management, fur design, and sales at Fur Fur Company in Chicago.

In 1990, I went to work for Smith Furriers in Oak Lawn, Illinois as a master furrier, in management and quality

control, and on buying trips in New York. The last thing I needed to do was to learn the art of pattern making. That would close the circle of a complete fur artist. That was the last thing for me to learn, even though I knew patterns, but not to the capacity I was dreaming about.

I have an analogy I always use, related to football teams. Each team has big, huge bodies. One is bigger and larger than the other is. But, by the end of the season, only one team wins, even though all have the same big bodies. The reason only one team wins, at the end, is that they go the extra eighth of an inch that takes them over the top.

I wanted to learn pattern making so badly, I called the master of the master fur artisans, truly unique as an artist, as a person, and as a character, Mr. Bill Tivers. He was also the president of the Fur Association of Chicago. His store and his shop were in Chicago, at the corner of State and Monroe Streets, the southwest corner, on the sixth floor. I got in touch with him. He knew me, because, in the past, I did sewing and remodeling for him on the side in the evenings. I worked a lot for all the furriers in Chicago. Sometimes, the talk was, "Oh, if you have Christos working for you, he is not going to stay too long." I had my reason as to why. I did it, because, those days, the majority of the storeowners were master furriers and artists. Even though they did not spend a lot of time in the shop, they knew how to make a fur garment themselves. I wanted to learn from every one of them, their ideas, techniques, seam secrets, lengthening coats, vertically, and not be able to tell if the coat has been lengthened or not, and ways of creating an art. Even today, I can tell where I learned what. I used to pick their brains about everything that concerned my artistry. That's what I did.

Today, the art has changed tremendously. I will talk about that later.

So, I called Mr. Tivers about the pattern making aspect of the art. His answer was, "Mr. Christo, I am going to send out letters to all the furriers in the Midwest about pattern-making classes and seminars. If we get a good response, I will do it."

I got so excited I was speechless. I waited two to three months, with no response. So, I got in touch with him again. This time, he said to me, "Mr. Christo, what do you want me to do? You are the only one that responded to my letters."

I was devastated. I had to learn all of his 50 years of knowledge on the art of pattern making and the fur art. So, I started calling and calling constantly. Finally, he got somewhat upset with me, and he said, "I will do it—just for you. But, you have to be at my shop every day at 6:30 in the morning."

My next word out of my mouth was, "DONE." He thought if he told me to come so early in the morning that, somehow, I would say no, or ask him, "Mr. Tivers, could you please do it at 9:00 or 10:00 am."

But, I wanted to learn so badly, I did not care about the time. To me, it was very important to close the remaining circle of the artistry that I am part of. Time was irrelevant to me. So, I said, "DONE."

He was a gray haired man, very tall, and had a lot of patience—a war veteran, with a lot of wisdom. He told to me what my mother always told me, "Never ever deliver any art that you create unless you love it first. Never ask a person what size they are."

I took his advice to heart and went beyond to the next level. I always strive for excellence, to do better. Now, I can see a person one mile away, and can tell what size he or she is—just by looking at them. I look at a garment on the hanger. I know exactly what it needs, even before a person tries it on. When I see the garment, in my mind, I already

have it finished in my photographic memory. I know the end result of the new look. I transfer that picture to the person first, and then to my patterns. I look at a fur or leather garment and can tell from which decade it was made. Today, I do not measure a person unless it is for a particular length. If a person puts pins on your garment for alteration, remodel, redesign, take it and run with it. If they do not know by looking at you, they do not know what they are doing in the first place. The reason they put pins on you is that, they do not know how to alter a garment. Even after the first pinned alterations are done, and they call you back for a fitting, and it still does not fit good—no pins, please. When a fur or leather garment comes to my store it no longer your garment, now is my garment I am working on it as if it represents me, my childhood, my patterns, my kids, my dreams, my family it is mine, I have to do the best workmanship in the world if better than anybody.

I did patterns for one year at his store and shop. Just as he told me, I was there at six thirty every morning. A big part of the lessons was how to make a pattern without a pattern and create the pattern out of the thin air. We talked extensively about styles, trends, and fashions. We also talked about what is possible and what is not creating art. We talked about the future of the fur industry. We took a very fitted mink coat and turned it into an A line coat. We did many redesigns together. I could not thank him enough. Later on, I did some fur designs for him at no charge, just because I was so thankful to him. I will be thankful to him forever and to all the other master fur artists that touched my life and artistry and made me who I am in my professional life.

At the shop, when I create a style or a garment in the evenings or mornings, styles and ideas come to me effortlessly. It is natural, just like the natural flow of a river. If you put a boulder or a rock—huge or small—in front of a river's natural flow, very simply, the water just flows around it. By the way,

that's when I get inspired, and, especially, when I listen to my grandfather's Gianni's songs. During those late evenings, when I am making my own patterns and designs, I say to myself, "Mr. Christo, what could you do now? Who would make patterns for you now, had you not been so persistent in learning your love and your art?"

By the way, even when I become 150 years old, when I listen to my grandfather's songs, I always get teary eyes—great, great man—the best. Thank you, grandfather Gianni and grandmother Paraskevi; love you forever and ever. In later years, I found out from my uncle Anastasios, my mother's younger brother, who took care of my grandmother in her old age, that my grandmother Paraskevi, in the last six months of her life, would go to the balcony, yell my name out loud, and look for me, crying at the same time, hoping she would see me. She loved me too much and I loved her too. I was living in Chicago, and nobody informed me about it, until about ten years after she died. I am sorry grandmother. I should have visited you more often. I am so sorry grandmother. I love you, and I am sure you and grandfather are watching me from above as to how, I, your grandson Christos represent you on earth. Thank you for all your teachings and all the years we were together. I will do my best to represent you, the best as I can. Thank you all. My uncle Anastasios has three kids—Gianni, Paraskevi, and Haralampo—and his wife Antonia.

Nobody ever took me to court for any reason in my life, and I never took anybody to court myself. I do not believe in that. If I cannot make someone a friend, for sure, I am not going to make that person an enemy, either.

I did my patterns while I worked for Smith Furriers in Oak Lawn, Illinois. There, I worked at the shop with ladies named Anna and Chrisoula, the owner, Mr. Nick Skountsos, his daughter, Linda, and son, Peter—great, great family and

business. Anna, my coworker, always told me, “I have this girl named Denise. I want you to meet her. She will be perfect for you to marry.”

My answer always was the same, “I do not want to you to introduce me to anybody. Besides, that is like match making (modern day internet meeting sites yesterday’s match making).”

But, Anna never left me alone. Every other day, she told me the same thing—like a broken record. “Let’s go. I want you to meet Denise.”

One afternoon, I went to Denise’s home to meet her and her parents—fantastic people. My father-in-law, Ted, a great gentleman, worked very hard all his life. My mother-in-law is a super lady in every aspect of her life. Thank you both—good, hardworking, excellent couple, nothing but the best. Denise has two sisters, Stella, and Vicki.

And, so, three months later, we got married, on July 14, 1990. Four years later, we had our first child, Maria. It was the most beautiful feeling in the world. I remember when we left the hospital and got home. Denise, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law, and I all went to our house at Hickory Hills, Illinois—unforgettable day. I was so happy and so protective. I said, “I am going to stay every day and night, like a soldier in a guard, in front of my Maria’s door, not even go to work.”

I am sure everyone who is a parent will understand. Life is beautiful.

In 1998, we had our second child, Paulina—another exciting year for us. I will never forget that moment when we called Maria to come to the hospital to meet her sister. All four of us were sitting at hospital bed. Maria was holding Paulina in an awkward position—like she did not know how to hold her. I kept saying, “Maria, this is your sister. Maria, this is your sister.” Maria held Paulina with a great smile on

her face, but continued holding her in that awkward position.

Since that time, I always say, never, I mean, never, give any person in your life a hard time for any, I mean, any reason. Only when you raise another human being yourself, will you understand how hard and how difficult it is to raise another person, to bring them into adulthood, going through all of life's difficulties to do that. Almost, every time, I say that, one person always say, "What does that mean, after I raise my kids, I can give other people a hard time?"

I say, "It means that after you see how hard it is, and what you have to go through in life to raise that human being, will you appreciate and understand the difficulties and how hard that is to do. That will make you think 10 times before you do, and why you should not give anybody in your life a hard time for any reason and, especially, for material things that most people do."

Beautiful life, excellent life—all of us enjoyed every moment. Thank you, God. Thank you, Denise. Thanks to everybody that was in my life—positive or even negative. If I had to live my life over again, I want it to be a carbon copy. I want the same exact life, to do it over, the same way. I do not want to change anything about it.

Go back three years to 1995. I went to work for Evans Fur Company as their master fur artist. Evans Company had about 29 stores. It was the largest in the United States. It was also the same company at which my mother worked for five years, when she first came to Chicago. It was a great thing for my family and me, at this point. I wanted security in a job for my family. Great, great company—great people to work with. People respected me as a professional and as a person. The company knew me, because the fur industry was kind of small. Any way, they knew my capabilities.

They gave me all, I mean, all the difficult redesigns that nobody wanted to do. Everybody wanted the easy remodels.

I was the opposite. I wanted to do the most challenging ones, then and now. So, it worked out perfectly for the company, Raul, who was in charge of remodeling, and me. I created a lot of master fur and leather arts, and a lot of custom-made garments, redesigns, a lot of reversible coats, jackets with leather or taffeta, cashmere, wool, jean, knitted materials, and, sometimes, with customers' own materials that they provided. I worked alongside master fur and leather artist, Ezy Green, and George Vitsunas. Things looked great. I looked to grow with the company, become a buyer, and oversee the manufacturing department.

But, for at least two years, there was talk that Evans Furs would go out of a business. I did not want to believe it. I thought, "There is no way Evans will go out of business—such a large company." I said, "How is it possible for such company to go out of business?"

I wanted to share the one part of my fellow's Ezy Green's life he told me about almost daily, at our lunch breaks on Dearborn and Monroe Streets in Chicago. He wanted the whole world to know his story. He was a tall, skinny fellow with blue eyes, a great artist and good friend of mine. So, here it goes.

He got divorced. He told me his wife kept the three daughters they had together. After one year or so, his ex-wife remarried. One night, he called his ex-wife to talk about the oldest daughter's school problems. When he called, it was about 9:30 p.m. The wife just happened to be in bed at that moment, having gone to sleep early for the evening. After two minutes into the conversation, she said to him, "How are you?"

As she started to talk about his daughter, he overheard the new husband say, "What the hell does that jerk want?"

Every time he got to this moment of his story, he kind of leaned over, as we were sitting on a bench, looked at my face

to see my reaction, and said, “Christo, Christo, he is sleeping in my bed and sleeping with my wife. I pay for the mortgage. I pay for all the food. I pay for all the bills, and I am the jerk outside, and he is the good guy inside.”

Then, he would lift his head back up and sigh. After a while, we slowly walked back to work. He still continued talking about it. He told me that, after a few years the new husband died. Someone found him in a neighborhood park, dead. He was an alcoholic. After that, all his daughters got together and convinced him to go back to his wife. He married her, but again got divorced.

By this time, my mother retired in Kastoria. But, sometimes she would come back and help me with the extra work I did for other furriers like B. C. International and others at my garage I had turned into a super shop (SUPER SHOP WITH NO HEAT). At the garage, it was so cold that, at wintertime, my hands would stick to the cold metal wheel of the sewing machine. After half an hour of working, I could not feel my fingers, especially on winter nights, which are even colder—no heat whatsoever. After the garage, I turned another room at the house into a fur shop.

Rumors continued that Evans Furs was really going to close. I wanted to grow with another great company for which I have a lot of respect. That company is called Nordstrom. It had a fur salon full of beauty, with spectacular designs, styles. Every time I went to Nordstrom at the Oak Brook Mall in Oak Brook, Illinois, I made sure to visit the fur salon, my love. There was no way I would miss that opportunity. I started going to talk to the manager, Rick, about a fur artist position; but, every time I went, he would tell me something like, “Oh, come back in three months. We do not need your artistry now.”

When I went back in three months, he told me to come back in six months, then in nine months. At one point, he told me to come back in two years.

After he told me that, I left the fur salon and walked around the mall for about forty-five minutes. As I went to my car, laughing and kicking some of last year's left-over leaves on the sidewalk, I said, "Oh, my God. What I heard just now is unbelievable. Time has no end."

As this continued like that, I became frustrated. I thought, "Wow, the months and the years have no end. They come and go as if it were nothing, so now, what? I want to work and grow with this super great company."

So, I brought my mother to the rescue. She and I talked about it for 10 minutes. At the end of the conversation, she said to me, "I am going to get a position there at Oak Brook."

So, Denise took my mother there. My mother went and applied as a finisher at the fur department. After she did that for a very short time, she was hired and worked there doing fur finishing and leatherwork. She started talking to Rick, Andrea, and upper management about me and the art that I was creating in Chicago.

In about two months, my mother came home with two sheared beaver jackets—a red one and navy blue one. They told my mother, "Please, here. Tell your son to enlarge these two jackets two sizes each and shorten them four inches.

They did not send me any matched fur to use to enlarge them with. I also think that, maybe, even the original manufacturer could not provide a match to do the work. It is virtually impossible to match a colored fur after it is made into a garment, so it can be added to it to enlarge it.

My mother came home elated. I danced around my kitchen table. I kissed my kids. I knew this was the beginning of a great future, finally.

We all had a great dinner—potatoes in the oven with chicken, and oregano on top with freshly squeezed lemon. After dinner, we had a little Greek wine. It is called

Agioritiko. It is made by monks in northern Greece. They make it at Mount Athos. It is great wine. Try it. You will love it. After the wine, my mother had a little grim on her face. She said to me, "My son, do you know there is no matched fur to enlarge these garments?"

I said, "Manna, I know there is no fur to enlarge these garments. But, at this point, let us all celebrate what we have."

I was not worried at all, because, at this point, in my mind, I had both of those jackets completely done and finished. But, I said to my mother, "God will help us. I am not worried at all, I mean, at all, as to how I am going to do my art. Let us go to sleep."

It was about 11:00 p.m. I kissed my kids, my wife, and my mother and went to bed a brand new man. The rest is a history.

I was hired at Nordstrom at the Old Orchard Mall in Skokie, Illinois. The store manager was a lady by the name of Heidy Cohen, very professional and a great person. Thank you. The fur department manager was Rosanda Arsenievic, a very modern lady and great sales lady, who cared a lot for all of us at the department. Thank you.

After the interview, I felt as if I were flying. I was 100 pounds lighter, just like a man that visits Mount Athos in northern Greece with all monasteries. Anybody that has visited says the same thing. As soon as you step afoot there, you feel like a new man. You feel 100 pounds lighter. You feel like nothing can affect you. Same thing happened to me—like something heavy had been lifted from my shoulders.

Again, as I was walking to my car, looking at the skies, looking left right, and at the skies, again thanking God for the opportunity, I was asking myself, "Oh, my God. Christo, are you really the man you told them you are?"

I could not believe the questions I was asked, and the answers I was giving at the interview. They brought my heart out on the interview table. That is why I always say that Nordstrom knows more about me than I know about myself. At one point, I thought, Please, I simply want to be your fur artist. I am not running for president (in a cute way). Even now, after about nine years or so, I still work and have some capacity with Nordstrom.

Now, when I visit, I feel so free in there, like I am Nordstrom, and only Nordstrom can make another human being feel extraordinary like that. For me, it is not a company, but it is my father and mother. I love it so much I cannot describe it. I feel I never left. My spirit wanders back and forth between Pteria, Orland Park, Nordstrom, and Westchester. I walk to different departments, talk to sales associates, to a small degree, because they are busy. I walk back to the alteration department, as if I had never left. I still am and always will be a part of that company, now and forever. I trust that great company more than I trust any other.

Even though I never had the opportunity to meet the Nordstrom family, they touch my heart and family's heart. No other company has ever come that close. I am positively sure that they have touched a lot of other people's hearts and family's. Bravo. Maybe, God willing, someday, I could meet them. Who knows? That can happen, too. Thank you very much, Mr. and Mrs. Nordstrom for trusting a little boy that grew up at in a little village that is called Pteria, that came to your door step, knocked on your door, and you not only opened it, but you opened it very widely. Thank you for opening your arms wide open for me. Thank you for taking me flying with your wings—nothing but the best.

And, so, I split my 40 hours a week between the Skokie and Oak Brook stores, doing my artistry and sales. I wanted a challenge in my life and with my art. I wanted to become

a buyer, designer, manager for Nordstrom, create our own line of styles, have our own facilities, our own factory, our own farm, our own label, take the fur department to a next level. To create masterpieces, not just fur or leather garments, wool, cashmere, or any other material for which I had an inspiration to do that exclusively for Nordstrom. Whatever I touch and put in my thoughts and hands on has to represent me. The person who sees my art will recognize that it is for sure Christos. My artistry has to talk to you, by itself. It has to touch your heart, as nothing else has. It will be with you for a lifetime.

If you like something, do not buy it. Only if you love it, then buy it, because, if you only like something, the word *like* is not strong enough for anything. It wears out very fast. I believe that whatever we buy in our lifetime, the product has to sell itself, not the discounts. Any time you say, "Can you do it a better price, can you do it at a greater discount?"

That really means you not only do not love it, but you don't even like it. You are forcing yourself to buy it because the product is discounted. It does not represent you anymore. If you discounted it is discounted, it means you bought something inexpensive, and nobody wants to wear anything inexpensive. It has to have value. Value cannot and should not be changed. It can only be appreciated for art and the purpose for which it was created.

When someone buys us a present, and, by accident, we find out that it was inexpensive, people rush to judgment and say, "I cannot believe he or she bought that for me. They are so cheap."

Then we turn around and we try to buy inexpensive products for ourselves, and we do that with so-called discounts. For the number one person in the world which is ourselves, if it has a value, love it buy it, enjoy it for years to come. Fundamentally, something is always wrong with anything inexpensive any way. Asking for a better price,

you are telling yourself to like it, not even close to loving it. When we love, we love unconditionally. We do not try to alter it. Anytime you try to alter it, it no longer is what it was. Do not force yourself to buy something because of the price.

I would like to share a case that took place at Oak Brook. A young lady, about 30 years old or so, came into our showroom that was right next to St. John's clothing department with her husband and father-in-law. She said to me, "Hi, how are you? I have this raccoon jacket my husband and father-in-law want me to restyle and wear,"

I asked her if she had any style in her mind that she liked or if she had an idea how her jacket should look. I wanted her to do a style that she loved. She said no—a very short answer. Then I wanted to guide her along into some style that would be suitable to her life style. I was helping her to pick out different styles ,collars ,sleeves, make it reversible to leather or taffeta, to possibly shearing it; but, anything I suggested to her, or her husband suggested, she always refused the new look. Finally after one hour and forty-five minutes, she decided to do the soft shoulders and collar from shawl to a wing. When I told her the price, which it was about \$650.00, she replied, "There is no way I will spend that kind of money."

I looked at her, now I do not know what had dawned on me, and said to her, "Well, I can understand if that was your mother's jacket." Then, as you see in the movies, her head turned to me in almost what looked like a 360-degree turn. Her face lit up, like one put together 1,000 Christmas candles. At the same time, her blue eyes got wide open. She replied to me, "Oh, sure. I would have spent the money if it were my mother's jacket." Then, somehow, we all looked at each other and decided to do the remodel.

For five years, I was the master fur artist at Nordstrom for

restyles, remodels, glazing, and sales, pattern-making, and making leather garments reversible. You name it. I did it.

I want to share another fact that took place at the Old Orchard store in Skokie. But, maybe, I should not, because it was kind of sad. It took me over a year to come to grips with and understand it. I think I should not write about it. On a second thought, I should write about it. You might wonder about that event. I do not want to leave any person on an unknown, unfinished half-built, half-broken bridge. I want to let you know what I felt. Plus, our lives have a tremendously sharp turns and dangerous cliffs.

A great individual walked into the showroom with his lovely wife. The time was 3:39 in the afternoon on a hot July day, an afternoon of beautiful sunshine. I just finished my lunch. I was having it late, because I used to work late hours, until nine in the evening. They walked in. I walk them in. We sat down. I started writing down all the information about them and the mahogany mink coat they had. The wife got up and started looking around for something to catch her eye, so to speak. Her husband and I continued talking about the coat and the upcoming vacation they were planning to do the rest of the summer. I was just as excited for them as they were a good, perfect couple. After the lady was done looking, she said to me, "Christo, I would love to shear my coat, raise the arm holes, and possibly redesign the collar. Call us in August to remind us so we can come in and do it."

I said, "Okay, perfect." They continued their shopping in the next department, St John's.

Just as I promised them, I called in August. The husband answered the phone.

I said, "Hi, how are you? How was the famous vacation? When would you like to come in and design the coat?"

He said with a voice that I would never forget as long as I

live. "My wife died in a scuba diving accident."

I stood there, speechless. I could not say another word to him. We stayed on the phone for a minute or so. I did not know what else to say. It was exactly like that moment we all have in our lives—a moment that seems to never end.

I said, "I am beyond sorry for what happened."

He knew that moment how I felt, and continued saying, "It is not easy. I will send my son in the fall to pick it up."

I was not the same for three months. I repeated to myself, "How could this happen? I just saw them not too long ago."

I told my wife about this *simvan* (happening, Greek) over and over again. Even now, when I write about this *simvan*, I have difficulty understanding how easily we can leave our temporary existence.

In October, I got a phone call from the husband. He said, "My son will come in Saturday to redesign the coat for his wife."

I was happy and sad. I was happy that I was going to meet their son, but sad about revisiting this *simvan*.

That Saturday, the son came in with his wife. They were in their 30s. I went to the back and brought out the coat. I hung it up on a small rack I had next to my desk. The son did not immediately come to see the coat. He kind of stood away from it for about one minute or so. His wife came to the coat first and started asking questions about how durable it was and if it can be died to a different color. Then, the son came and held the left front of the coat with his right hand. He was facing north. I was facing south. He looked at me with a huge question mark in his eyes, looked at me as if he knew me for 100 years. Then, he looked at the coat. He looked at me again, as if I knew something. He told me, "You knew my mother. You met my mother."

I felt what he was telling me. The color of one's eyes does

not make us sad or happy. It is how that person is looking at us. Then he started smelling his mother's coat. He could still smell her perfume he said, and he started to cry.

I was devastated again. I started crying with him, right there in the showroom. We cried for a while. I said to him, "Eagles fly very, very high, so the rest of the birds cannot see them cry. But, these two eagles can cry on this earth today for a special person in our lives, our moms."

We did the redesign. They were very happy with the results of the design and the design they chose. It was a genuine experience of feelings.

It was a great paradise for me to work at Nordstrom. Thank you very much.

I also want to share these thoughts with you. Today, in the world we live in, when you walk on any street and you say hi to someone male or female, two things go through their mind, either you are crazy or you want something. To me that is very sad that we live like that. As humans, we are very sociable. If you just make eye contact, smile, and say hi, I guarantee you will make that person's day. Try it. Maybe it happened to you already. Someone smiled at you, and you went on your way to work with your own smile.

The year is 2005. The Nordstrom Company decided not to carry furs any more. Or, let me rephrase that—not to have a fur salon and storage all year around. The company decided to sell furs only seasonally, and closed the fur salon permanently, for an unknown reason to me.

Here is another blow for me. But, this time I said to me, "It is what it is Christo."

Nordstrom at Oak Brook offered Marion, my coworker, and me to stay and to be trained to sell fine jewelry. It was a great offer, great idea. Thank you, Nordstrom. My coworker took the training and stayed with the company.

I decided not to stay, only because I still wanted to do what I love in my life. I like servicing humanity. I want to leave a legacy behind me, through my kids, Maria and Paulina, if they would love the idea, the art, and have the passion to do it. I wanted to continue my childhood dream, my artistry. I was not ready, in any shape or form, not to continue what God put me on this earth to do, to keep people warm, looking great, enjoy the natural wonders in life that God created for us.

And so, another chapter in the life of Christos, the master fur artist began on May 1, 2005. I opened my own store just east of the Oak Brook Mall at 10407 West Cermak Road, Westchester, Illinois 60154, on the southwest corner of Cermak and La Grange Roads.

Traveling north on La Grange Road, at Cermak Road, the name of the road changes. It becomes Mannheim Road. South of Cermak Road, it is called La Grange Road.

From the first day, and for at least one month, I was the only employee. It was a one-man show, like the saying goes—in the showroom, the shop, the sales person, the finisher, the president, and all of the above. The store was about 1,000 square feet, just enough for me to start. Also, it was exactly 2.5 miles east of Oak Brook Mall, where my favorite store, Nordstrom is located.

At my store, my little corner of the world, there was no parking in front of the store. We had only three parking spots in the back. On Cermak Road, about 40,000 automobiles go by there daily, east and west, in front of the store.

It is very convenient to come to me from anywhere. Highway 294, which goes north and south, is about three minutes away from the store, just west of us. Highway 290 that goes east to Chicago and west to Schaumburg and connects to Highway 355 is about two minutes away from me, just north of us on Mannheim Road. O'Hare

International Airport is about 15 minutes away from the store. You can take Highway 294 north or can take Mannheim Road north. From downtown Chicago, when you are on Highway 290, coming west, the store is about 15 minutes away. With no traffic, it is a very convenient place to which to come. Midway airport is about 20 minutes from the store. Just take La Grange Road south, then left onto Highway 55. Then take a right onto Cicero Avenue, going south. You are there in five minutes.

At this point, my mother was back in Greece with my father. I was in need of a finisher, very badly, the worst way ever.

There was a time I was using the washroom, and the doorbell rang. I could not even go to open the door. I mean you talking about a one-man show, here or not.

I hired different seamstresses, but they were not good. I was not satisfied with the outcome of the workmanship, at all. I tried to teach at least four different individuals; but nobody had a passion. I taught them, but the interest was not there. It was as if they were just going through the motions. There was no effort of any kind. Sewing is not a skill you can learn easily unless it is in you. It is not enough just to sew. Sewing has to speak by itself, so others can appreciate it.

So, whom was I going to call—my mother again? I called my mother, and we talked. She said, “Do not worry, son. I will be there. And not only that, I can be 150 years old and will still be there with you working.”

I said, “*Manna*, I cannot believe that me, Christos, your son can be without a finisher—our fur family without a finisher. I cannot believe or comprehend that. Not even one of my sisters is here to work with me.”

At this point, both of my sisters were married and lived in Greece. My sister, Toula, has one daughter named Sia. My

sister, Despina, has two kids, a son named George, after my father, and a daughter named Stella, after her husband's Steve's mother.

In September of 2005, my savior, my mother, came here to work with me. What a gratifying time. It was unbelievable—for a lot of reasons—for my kids, for me personally, for our business, and for my wife. I thought to myself, "Christo, your mother is back. She is here with you again." It felt so great it cannot be described.

My idol is my mother, great woman, tough never says anything that is not the rooted in truth. She has an eye on whether things are perfect or not. At my house, we poured cement in the back yard. My mother said to me, "Son, this cement it is not straight. It has a cave in two places." The cement people were arguing that there was no cave in the cement. Three weeks later, when it rained, we had two caves exactly where my mother pointed out. My mother is an extraordinary woman.

Now, one more time, things look good for us. And, this time, everything is in my hands and my mother's to show my and my mother's artistry. We have our one store not relying on anybody for my family's future and the future of fur artistry. Finally, I am here, a very healthy man, strong, energetic, with great ideas, great inspiration. I am ready to create and showcase my fur and leather artistry to the world, plus, show my own way of defining customer touch, at the small place that I have in my little corner of the universe.

Pretty much, it is very simple and comes naturally. Put your heart on every design and respect everyone that puts bread on your table by coming into your store. Made-to-order garments are meant to fulfill people's dreams. Nobody else can do it like me. Creating their dream garment into reality and being part of their life's history is part of the excitement. That garment it will stay in the family for four

generations to come and be a part of that family's history.

I always say, "Think about this. 100 years from the moment you read this book and after, none of these human beings that are walking around on this earth as visitors today will be walking around. There will be all new people walking around. And so, if I were born 100 years from today, you and I would never meet as visitors on this earth."

So, I respect every one that God put me with to walk around on this earth the same time and came in contact with me all through my visitation on this earth regardless of how long or short that might be. Respect one another. If I cannot make somebody a friend, for sure, I do not want to make that person enemy either. One of the graces in life is to put your head on a pillow at night and be able to say I did good things today, I did great things today, I did wonderful things today, for a fellow human being I did extraordinary things today. I treat everyone like a celebrity, because every one of us is a celebrity. I do my best, and God will do the rest. Do not do any short cuts. Always give the best of my ability plus. Believe me, this would make it a better world and place to live.

When a person comes to my store, or leaves my store, when they reach the door and say good-bye to me, the last thing I always want to remember is their smile. And, a lot of times, when they reach for the door, they are still smiling while looking at me, and, because they are still looking at me when they try to open the door, they hit their head on it.

I respect every person that comes into my life, even for 10 seconds of their precious lives, talking to me, the time they spent next to me, around me, with me. I respect that tremendously, because they could have been decided to spend their time somewhere else, or with someone else, or doing something else. It is an honor for me that another human being spends and takes his or hers precious breaths with me. In some kind of form, with everyone I meet, I always try my

best not to finish our acquaintance with a period—always with a comma.

My mother and I are building our business the great old-fashioned way. Word of mouth is the best way. It was before and will be in the future. Do not let anybody tell you otherwise. Through the internet, people today use a new means of the word-of-mouth method that is even faster and gets in touch with even more people on a larger scale than we can imagine. Remember, every human being in our world—yesterday, today, and tomorrow—can only operate on the same five senses that God gives us.

There is no such thing that it is called old fashioned. When people want to excuse whatever it is they are doing when it is somewhat not up to par, they call and label other people who have common sense in the world, old fashioned. One can only be called old fashioned when that person has wisdom and that very precious common sense.

Everything was great. But, my mother had to go back to my father. He made tremendous sacrifices for me by letting my mother come and help me, leaving him alone, back in Greece. It was not that much fun for him.

We were thinking about how we could possibly extend her stay until February 2006. At least, the season would subside somewhat by then. We also thought, as long as my mother was here, she could train and teach somebody. With those thoughts in our minds, in the beginning of November, here came a lady called Mariya with her daughter name Kateryna. Someone from Nordstrom gave them our name and address to come and work for us. Now, that was great, but there was a problem. Mariya did not speak any English, and Kateryna did the interpretation. Mariya laid out all her diplomas in front of my mother that she brought from her country, about patterns and about sewing dresses. I looked at my mother and she saw the question mark I had at my face. She said to try her out for a week. I said, “Manna, she

has no idea what we are doing and what fur and leather art is. She is very good. She is great with sewing, but only on clothing, not what we need.”

My mother looked at me with that sweet look of hers that always means trust me son. She said, “Let her work for two weeks. I will tell you.”

For two weeks, Mariya worked. Then, decision time came. I remember my mother looking at me with her sky blue Greek eyes. She said, “*Pedi mou*, she knows how to hold the needle.”

That was more than enough for me to hear from my mother. My mother taught only two people in her life the secrets of fur and leather artistry, Mariya in the U.S. and one other lady in Kastoria. Her name was Parthena. She only taught these two ladies, not because she did not want to teach anybody else. She wanted to teach the art only to people she believed had the same passion as she did for the art. And, again, my mother was 1,000 percent right about Mariya. She became an extraordinary artist with us, one of the best in the world. There is nothing Mariya cannot do.

And, we have fun, sometimes. We say Mariya can never be let go from Christos fur store, because she was hired and taught by my mother. That is called respect for my mother’s choice and for Mariya.

My mother—only my mother—has the right to let Mariya go. So, Mariya, when you read this book, you will know you are at Christos fur salon forever—as long as you want to.

I had fun with my mother up until the day she left. I said, “*Manna*, you did it on purpose. One Maria hired another Mariya. You wanted somebody to continue your legacy with the same name.”

She again looked at me with her sky blue Greek eyes and smiled. Thank you, mother, and thank you, Mariya, for all efforts and for coming to Chicago. Thank you for everything. And, now, Mariya is teaching my daughter, Maria. I guess it

really was meant to be that the art continues to be taught from one Maria to Mariya to Maria. Thank you, all.

My mother left in February of the 2006. We had promised my father she would be back by that month.

In 2008, Kateryna came to work with us. That idea was Kateryna's. She loves, I mean, loves fashion, style, and creativity. She loves fur in general. She has a passion to become like me, the fur artist of the world. She started right away to cut, sew, create, and, sometimes, model. I did not do to her what Gianni did to me in Kastoria, letting me sew newspapers at the beginning. She worked the machines right away.

Kateryna reminds me a lot of myself. She has the same passion as me, if not more. She does fittings and patterns. She makes and creates spectacular styles. Kateryna has the determination to learn and be great at that.

Our styles, redesigns, custom made, and people's service was great. In five years, we outgrew our current space. Kateryna said constantly that we needed a larger place. We did not have enough room anymore, and it was true. I believe and trust everyone that surrounds me in our art. And, because our store was too small for us, the store was only 20' by 50' we had our eyes set to move into a bigger store. We wanted to grow and expand to larger store. But, at the same time, I was kind of comfortable there where we were. Nevertheless, we started looking for our new location. We looked at Naperville, Geneva, St Charles, all Illinois towns. And, finally, right next door to us, there was a bicycle store that moved out. We moved into that place. We moved exactly three feet away, one side walk over. I was joking at that time saying, "Guys, we do not even need a truck to move our machines; and this time, we have plenty of parking right in front of our store.

Exactly five years to the day, on May 1, 2010, we moved

to 10411 West Cermak Road, Westchester, Illinois 60154. The phone there is 1-708-562-3877, the URL www.christosfursalon.com christosfur@gmail.com.

In 2011, my Maria joined the Christos Fur Salon team. It was like a milestone for me. My Maria is working with me. I cannot believe she is grown already. I cannot believe that the time was here all ready. She likes all the aspects of the business. She has added a monogramming machine, has designed our new logo (Christos Furs). She takes small strides. She is very innovative. She has started sewing with me. She makes small item patterns and absolutely loves making purses. She wants to do the branding. Plus, she has another great teacher, Mariya.

On Friday, September 20, 2011 at 7: 48 p.m., right after we left the restaurant called Sun Mist of my best friend, Giorgos Kotsapouikis and his wife Angie, my Maria announced to me that she wants to become a master fur artist. I was so thrilled, so happy, so ecstatic when I heard that I would have had an accident with the car if I were driving it. It was a great thing that she was the driver. Thank you, Maria. We got soup for Paulina. She was under the weather, so to speak, that day.

Now, it is a different story with my Paulina, for now at least. She is very bright. She comes and goes as she pleases to our art shop. So far, she only likes to wear furs and leathers. Sometimes she shows an interest in creating leather jackets, pants, boleros, and a combination of leathers and furs. She loves to come over with her girlfriends and show the store and what she has made, and go out for lunch with Kateryna and her girlfriends. Sometimes, she says she wants to become a tattoo artist, and I say to myself, "Christo, be quiet. Nevertheless, she will be an artist. She will live and have her own glory, "Bravo, Paulina mou (*My Paulina, in Greek*)."

It was a blessing for us that we did not move far, so our

people can find us easier. It was a correct idea for all of us.

My mother had a heart operation at 2011. She is doing great. My father is okay. It is very unfortunate that Denise and I got divorced. Nevertheless, she is doing great. My kids are great. They love fur and leather artistry. They have great ideas for the future.

Remember, I always say, "Nothing is easy. If it were easy, everybody would have done it."

Mariya, like my mother predicted, became the best in the world as an artist. Kateryna has become great. She still strives for the best and absolutely loves what she has learned. She loves what she does and loves our new location. The future for our artistry looks very bright. I am blessed to have my kids around me. At the same time, they want to continue the family's fur and leather art history. It is very fulfilling for me. I surround myself with the best people, like Mariya and Kateryna, who are going to continue with me the art of fur and leather, natural fibers, and my legacy, like, someday, somebody else will continue theirs.

My sisters and all my relatives are doing great, thank God. And, whoever reads this book, God bless you and your relatives. God, please, bless the world.



HOW TO BUY A FUR COAT

As a rule in the fur world, every fur garment should have open bottom. It is also called a French bottom. A person should be able to lift the lining and see if the underneath of the fur is dyed, color has been add to it, or natural. If the back is black, it means it is dyed. If it is light grey, it means color has been added to it. If it is light beige in color, it means it is natural. If the garment has a French bottom, it hangs better on a person and the garment has a better flow. As buyer, you have every right to go under the lining and use your two hands to pull the pelts horizontally and see if it has any give or not. If it has a give, it means the pelts were not stretched beyond a limit the skin fibers can withstand. It is made very well and respectfully for the buyer and the art itself. It is a great art. It is a great garment to buy. If it has no stretch, try to avoid purchasing it. It means the fibers of the pelts have been so stretched out beyond their limit. You will constantly have rips on your garment.

Let us say, you want to make a coat, and you have to use 50 pelts. The person who makes your coat decides to use 46 pelts in order to cut cost. Right, there that person has overstretched the pelts way more in order to cover the pattern. That is an inferior coat, because overstretching them apart has weakened the three-way dimensional fibers.

If a buyer follows these basic but very important steps, when buying a fur garment, a lot of headaches will be saved in the future. Plus, you will be assured that the garment will be inherited by the next generations to come. These

garments I am referring to are garments made out of full pelts of any kind.

When you buy a garment that is made out of sections and pieces, the same method can be applied. But, you have to keep in mind that garments made from sections and pieces in general are not so strong and not as durable as those with full pelts are. It does not mean you should not buy them. If you love the cut and the design, think that the garment is for you and you should have it in your wardrobe, if that is your desire and money is no object, they can be very stylish and very colorful. They can be made reversible to any material. Nothing goes to waste. You will find them in a variety of different colors. It just means they are not as durable. Plus, they should cost a lot less. Just like the variety of the full-pelt garments, you can find the same variety with those made from sections and pieces.

Now onto leather garments. A French bottom hemline can be applied to a leather garment, just like a fur coat, in order for a coat or jacket to hang freely and display a great flow. See to it that it does not have or it is not made from too many small pieces. Make sure that the fronts are not rolling, that the grains are similar, and that they go the same direction. Also, check the pelts under the lining to see if they are strong enough. Sometimes, if the tanning process is not up to par, the pelts can be very fragile. Make sure the fronts do not cross over each other when they are closed with buttons.

Speaking of fronts closers. MY SIGNATURE FRONT CLOSERS for all leather outerwear I make, do not, I repeat, do not, use button holes, zippers, or any other closers, because the less holes you put on leather, the better it is, the stronger it stays, and the less likely it is that it will tear on you. Leather is a style. It has to be as natural as possible and not be put under any stress. Leather is representation

of the each individual choice. Leather by itself is only a transitional garment. It was not meant to keep you warm, just to look great and stylish. If you want and need warmth, you need then to buy a fur garment. Leather is meant to make you look great. Leather is meant to be worn only March, April, May, September, and October in climates like those of Chicago. Maybe I think differently, but that is I, Christos.

In general, most leather garments are made of cow skins, or lamb. If you want longevity, buy cow skins. They last a long time, but they are and feel thicker. Lamb, on the other hand, is very soft. You can feel that in the touch; and when you wear them, they can fit in the palm of your hand. The only problem with it is that they tear easily. In that case, the only thing I suggest you do is replace the panel that it is torn. That is the best solution and remedy or have it sewn by us. I never suggest gluing it. It never looks the same. It shows terribly; plus, the glue can eventually dry out the pelt and then you have bigger and worst situation on your hands. You have to make a choice. It is a tough one between the two.

Leather can be cleaned. First, it is required to take out all the dust particles; then to do what it is called color restoration, and that can be done on any color. When your leather outerwear looks faded, it is time to do color restoration. The end results are unbelievable. Do this every two years or so. That will make it look constantly great. Suede of pig and others have a great feel to them, but they are not as easy to clean.

A shearling garment is great for men and women today. Before you buy it, please make sure the fronts are not rolling outwards when you try it on. Some of the shearlings are notorious for doing that, and that happens if they were over stretched in the tanning process. But, the majority of them are made great.

For me, the number one is the U.S.A. Mink. It beats all furs, in every category of comparison, in all aspects and, of course, in durability. The light colored mink is the best of any category for dying into any other color you love. It is the best candidate to turn it into red, blue, green, yellow, or you could bring us you favorite color, and we will match it in order to make a new coat. Plus, mink is the number one fur by far for redesigning than any other fur.

Number 2 is sable, especially, Russian sable. It is a durable fur, and it has a great under fur, great for redesigns, luxurious look, and very warm. The best oil brushes in the world are made from its tail hairs.

Number 3 is chinchilla. It is very incredibly soft, but not so durable, very sensitive. It looks great as a garment. It is great for trimming, especially on black colored garments and leather too, or it can be dyed to a different color to match individual taste.

Number 4 is fox. A fox's medium durability is not so preferable in a garment these days, because of its bulkiness. But, it is excellent for trimming any garment, including wedding gowns, leathers, cashmere, and wool. It is perfect for leg warmers and covering purses.

Number 5 is raccoon. It is very durable and great for a coat. It also can be used for trimming any garment, including men's garments. Its silvery and dark color gives a garment a distinctive appearance.

Number 6 is beaver. It is semi-durable and great for garments and trimming any garment. Any idea you have, especially when it is sheared. Beaver is unbelievably soft and can be used for bedspreads, pillows, bed sheets. You name it. It also has a great look in dyed colors, from green, to red, and my favorite color, blue.

Number 7 is tanuki (Japanese for raccoon). It is durable and its natural dark and light brown color gives it a unique

appearance. It is great for trimmings.

Number 8 is otter. It is durable and great for garments, blankets, bed covers, car seats, airplane seats, and trimmings.

Number 9 is Chinese mink. It is not so durable and mostly used as for sheared garments and reversible coats. Chinese mink has no comparison to U.S.A. mink.

Number 10 is nutria. It mostly comes from Argentina and is semi-durable, good for garments, and liners for leather and cashmere.

Number 11 is muskrat. It is semi-durable, good for garments, pillows, bed covers, leg warmers, and hats. Actually, its small size allows a master artist to create many different designs. I can make anything your heart desires with any fur. I can combine diamonds and furs for your lifestyle and taste. I can create the most ultimate outerwear you can imagine.

Number 12 is raccoon from Finland. Its long hair is very, very warm. It has a lot of under fur and a very bulky look. That is why you will see such coats are made feathered, which means the furrier used leather in between the pelts, sometimes to get a certain style, or to use less fur.

The king of the fur is a mink, especially here in the U.S.A. We produce the best mink in the world. Our mink has very distinctive characteristics. It comes in 12 or so different natural colors. It has a very short nap or guard hair, as it is called. The shorter the guard hair, the more under fur it produces. That makes it feel more plush and silkier. The American mink has so much under fur that when it is sheared it feels so spectacular and so soft, as if you are touching the clouds. I cannot decide which one is softer, the mink or the beaver, when they are both sheared. That is what I call a natural wonder.

Other mink from around the world has longer guard hair. It feels somewhat coarser. Check and see to make sure the

garment you buy has at least a one to 1-1/2 inch turn up at the hemline and the same at sleeve edges. Make sure it has at least two to three inches or so of facing at the front edges that is inside your garment.

Never, ever, shorten a fur coat more than 2-1/2 inches at the hemline. It looks cut off. A coat loses its natural finished look that it had originally. A lot of times, I see a great art of workmanship on a nice quality coat of \$10K, 20K, and even 100K. The coat has been shortened at the hemline three or five inches or more. It looks cut off, with no respect for the buyer and for the art itself. If you need to shorten a coat more than 2-1/2 inches, it needs to be shortened from the top. Do the same on a coat that has a designed hemline. Do the same if the coat has a swing hemline. It has to be shortened from the top so you do not lose the swing part on the bottom.

Never wear a fur or leather coat where the length hits you in the middle of your calf. It looks like you borrowed someone else's coat to wear for the weekend. Plus, it makes your calves look larger than they really are.

If the mink coat you want to buy looks shiny, it means it has a lot of long guard hair and is not so great quality. It means it does not have a lot of under fur. It will not feel blush and silky. It will feel coarse to your touch.

When you choose other fur besides mink, especially longhaired furs, make sure there is not a lot of leather in between the pelts. Then, you are buying more leather than fur—unless the furrier artist combined them to create a certain style and look on the garment. Because people think or have the perception that fur coats are heavy, they dread wearing them. I GOT GREAT NEWS for all fur and leather naturalists of the world. Furs and leathers are not heavy at all. The pattern is wrong. The pattern is very wrong, and I mean, wrong. That is what makes a person feel that the coat is very heavy and drags them down constantly. Always trying

to bring the coat back up on their shoulders.

I have corrected so many coats where everyone is amazed at how lightweight a fur or leather is. Everybody said, "I always dread the time that I have to wear my coat. I had no idea that was the problem all these years. Nobody did a fitting. I just liked the color and the cut of the coat, bought it, and left.

FITTING—wow, what a great word! Always ask to be fitted to make sure the coat feels comfortable on you. Please do not be in a hurry under any circumstances. A fitting is a must. It is very important how comfortable you feel in it. The number one priority is to make sure the coat or jacket does not feel heavy.

These are the symptoms of it being heavy:

Number one: When you have the garment on, it drags you down backwards. It feels like it is going away from your shoulders and falls back. You constantly have the need to bring the coat back up to sit on to your shoulders.

Number 2: It has no straight fronts when the coat is closed. The fronts cross over each other at the bottom of the hemline. They do not fall perfectly straight.

If the garment is big on you, please make sure nobody is trying to convince you that, in order to make the coat or jacket fit you better, just the rings have to be moved over towards your side, and that will do it. The rings should not play a major factor in making the garment fit better.

As a rule, when you close the garment, the rings it should not exceed the three-inch mark from the front edge. If it does that, your garment looks off center. That means it has to be sized down in order to fit properly.

Do not buy any garment that is small on you—bad idea. Plus, do not think in your mind, "Oh, I like the coat. They do not have another one in my size. I am going to lose weight."

Believe me. That does not work either. So, save yourself from headaches. That garment was not meant to be, unless the owner is a master fur artist, and he or she can make one for you right there in his or her shop.

Number 3: Lift your arms to make sure you don't lift the whole side of the coat, and, at the same time, your sleeves do not come almost up to your elbows. That is absolute a no buy. Never buy any garment with that problem. Never, ever, will it be comfortable on you. You will constantly regret the moment you bought it and your needlessly spending your hard-earned money—unless, the place you are buying it from can correct it for you, because it can be corrected when put on the correct pattern.

These are the three major flaws that a potential buyer needs to give an attention to. These problems are everywhere—on the majority of garments, regardless of where they are purchased.

Make sure you are given a proper fitting. In this commercial world we live in, make sure people care—really care—how great you will look in the garment you are purchasing. When you buy a coat and, at the fitting time, the fitter puts pins on your coat, that is an automatic indication the person has no clue what he or she is doing; so, either call for a real fitter or, I venture to say, do not buy the garment. You will not be excited wearing it—at all. So, make sure where ever you buy your dream coat, you have a good fitting.

Feel the coat light on your back with great flow. Remember, fur and leather is a life style, a natural and renewable energy, a fashion statement, an experience of natural warmth, and a valuable investment. It will last you a lifetime, and it can be passed on to future generations of your family to enjoy.

Fur and leather is a respectable product of nature. Fur and leather—nothing even comes close to it. Fur and leather

is respect of our past, present, and future. Fur and leather—feel the warmth of luxury. Fur and leather is biodegradable. Fur and leather is ecofriendly. Fur and leather is our own human history. Fur and leather is art and respect. Fur and leather matter.

If the fitter is not up to par, you will not get a great fitting, or any fitting at all. It means even the next generation will not feel great wearing a garment that is not fitted properly. A real fur artist should not use pins to do a fitting. Just looking and writing is what needs to be done.

A lot of times, they use pins to do the alteration. You come back for the fitting, and it is not right. Even on the second fitting, sometimes is still wrong. Please no pins.

At our place, we do the fitting just by looking at you, and it is done. Just like that. Everybody is amazed that just by eye balling the garment I know what to do. When I am asked how I know to do that, I just point to the picture I have framed in our store of a 15-year old kid sewing furs in Kastoria. The next words are, “Wow. That is amazing. You have been doing that since you were 15 years old.”

I say, “I was born to service humanity in this small corner of the wide world we live in.”

After our customers pick up their garments and wear them, they come with a box of champagne. They say, “We did not know that such a person and place exists in America. Christos, you should be on every television show and program in America, Germany, Austria, France, Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Serbia, Italy, Moldavia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Mexico, and Peru. You should do a Q&A tour around the world. You should be on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Charlie Rose, WTTW Channel 11, the public station in Chicago, the Oprah television station—educating the world by doing the Q&A about the hundreds of possibilities, they have in their hands to redesign their existing outerwear of any type.”

All these natural, three-dimensionally woven fibers will last you a lifetime. Even a third generation can enjoy grandmother's garment or grandfather's garment by redesigning it into a new, completely different great style. **SOMETIMES, THE BEST PLACE TO SHOP IN THE WORLD IS IN YOUR OWN CLOSET.**

One of my customers came to me from Ohio—father and daughter. They came in, recommended to us and said. I quote, “We have our grandmother's raccoon coat and we would like to keep it in the family. We are seven grandchildren, and all of us want to have a piece of our grandmother's coat and history. We have gone to several fur places.”

I stopped them right there, and said, “Yes, I know the story. It is very familiar to me. I hear it all the time—every day pretty much. You can do nothing with grandmother's coat or grandfather's coat. You have to buy a new one.”

Their eyes opened widely. They said, “You are so right. Every place we went to told us exactly that. We have to buy a new one. We can do nothing with this coat. This coat is long gone.”

Then, we all smiled and sat down. We offered them our specialty coffee—a frappe, Christos style. To make a long story short, I made seven trooper-style hats. They loved each one of them. The saga of the family's value—that is, grandmother's coat—continues.

So, with any outdated or vintage outerwear, I can bring it to a new style to fit in with present fashions and styles. On your part, you only have to clean, glaze and store it once a year, regardless whether you wear it a lot or not.

Very important—it has to be cleaned of all particles, and be kept away from heat and from moths. Believe me. Moths love fur, cashmere, and wool. They can ruin it so it becomes worthless. Moths can infect the whole house. Clean it to

maintain the longevity of the garment. Plus, I cannot stress this enough. After you pick up your garment from storage, please wear it every day pretty much, because, the more you wear it, the longer it will last. The movement keeps it more suppler. That is very important. Nothing should stay still constantly. Put it on everywhere you go. Fibers pelts are rejuvenated from constant movement—very, very important.

Pretty much every household in America and the world has at least two leather garments or furs. They sometimes just sit there, because people do not know what to do with them, because they are out dated, or they have rips, or they are too big, or too small, or worn out, or they got wet and shrunk two sizes, or they do not like the color any more. Please put them to use. The possibilities are endless. Let them do and be used for their purpose in life, or give them to somebody and let them enjoy these natural arts.

IF SOMEONE cannot come to my full of life and energy place of art and hospitality, to my little corner of the world, for their own privacy, I travel to my people's corner of their world and places to make the garment they desire. They can participate in sketching, designing, stitching, and making it.

Let us say, that you have one of your relatives world war leather, bomber jacket in your hands and it needs some attention, it can still be taken care of. Or, let's say, your favorite leather that has a sentimental value, or just fits you perfectly because leather has a tendency of getting the fit of your body after wearing it a long, and, let us say, that you tore it on the sleeve, or front, or it does not matter where it is torn, please do not discard it. Simply bring it or sent to me. We replace the turn panel with a new one. If you love your leather, this is the best remedy for torn panels. Save yourself from a headache.

Do not pay somebody to glue it. You can glue it yourself. No matter how good it is glued, it always shows. We do not

glue rips together. It does not look attractive. It is not professional. It shows very badly. Plus, glue is not good for natural fibers like leather, furs, or shearling. It dries it out. And, sometimes, in the cleaning process, and it bleeds through.

If your leather looks faded, bring it or mail it to us. We will do a color restoration. Together with our chemist, we will match it perfectly. Go green. Recycle.

Now going back to the television shows. It will be the best show—very informative. Around the world, people will IM, asking to make more shows with Q & A about fur and leather—shows that nobody else ever did to inform millions of people that own these natural fibers—or a weekly television show making a garment on the set. We would donate funds to the favorite charities of those who buy garments produced on the show. On all cable channels, on the internet, all over the world—doing educational shows about fur and leather art and the natural fibers that they are made of.

There is one way to take care of a garment. First, it has to be cleaned, glazed, and stored, every year by furriers only, and put away for the summer. It has to be cleaned regardless whether it was worn or not. That prolongs the longevity of the fur or leather.

Please pay attention—especially, if the fur is not cleaned every year and, God forbid, somehow, you get a moth on your fur coat, you ruin it forever. Moths, as you know, love wool and furs. So, please, clean and store them every year to protect them. Plus, for the little money you spend, you protect your valuable investment and save yourself from a lot of headaches. Clean and store them, every year, to keep them away from summer heat so they do not dry up. The myth about cedar closet—it only works the first year, anyway.

Plus, there is no humidity control environment. It is too

dry in those closets.

Second, fur and leather can be redesigned to a style you can sketch yourself. I will make the pattern. Or, we can help you to decide on the best fit for you. You can be a part of the making and the sewing, if you so desire. To fit your life style, fur can be down or up sized. It can be turned into reversible leather, with jean, taffeta, or a water repellent material. Make leg warmers. With the shortening of the coat from the top, if you are tired of having it as a coat, I can cover your favorite purse, or add fur to your boots to match your garment. I can make blankets, put sheared fur in caskets for your loved ones who loved their fur, make pillows, cover cell phones, put fur on wedding gowns for winter weddings, and trim your favorite wool or cashmere garment with a fur collar and cuffs.

Or, trim your leather coat or jacket with fur, make colorful ponytail holders to match your hair color or use them for a contrast. When you pull leather pony tail holders down, they never pull your hair out. Plus, you can use them as bracelets. You can take an outdated or vintage stole and turn it into a vest or it can be combined with other natural materials—like the universe full of unimaginable possibilities and limitless. Thank you, God. So, whatever you imagine—we can design together, your new dream garment—and you can be involved with the process of making it. Live it, experience it, adore it, love it, get involved—be natural.

When it comes time to buying a fur garment, I say that sales associates should be proud of what they are selling. They should show a potential buyer the skin side of the pelt. The skin side is just as important, if not more important than the fur side, because the skin side is what keeps it all together.

As a fur buyer from whomever you are buying a garment, you have to know whether you are buying a natural or dyed garment or whether color has been added to it. Fur and

leather is made out of three dimensionally woven fine natural fibers. When those fibers are cut, they do not fray, unlike regular material, which, when it is cut, frays, because those threads go only two dimensionally, vertically and horizontally. As those natural fibers come up closer to the surface of the skin, they are even finer. That is why your leather garment gets such a spectacularly shiny surface after the tanning process, wax based coloring or regular color. If those fine top fibers are worn out, the leather cannot become shiny again. The only logical remedy is to replace the pelt and panels on your leather.

The owner of a fur store should be able to make a new fur or leather garment from beginning to end. If they can't make a new garment. Make your own conclusion.

In the 60s and 70s, stoles, muffs, jackets, and the traditional long ranch mink coat was very much in style, especially the fitted waist look, and brim hats. In the 80s, the combination of long hair fur and mink garments dominated the styles, in an A line, swing cut with the dolman sleeves. In the 90s, it was more and more a reversible cut with a straight look, and multi-colored furs. The most popular of all was shearing part of the fur, which showed the under fur of the fur, and opened new possibilities for redesigns. It is so soft—like touching feathers. It is the closest thing you can possibly compare it to—but, really, there is no comparison. Fur is by far softer. Plucked beaver and mink are very popular. I, personally, like sheared rather than plucked fur better, because, when fur is plucked, it means all the long guard hair is pulled out. When it is sheared, it is all done together, which includes the guard hair and gives it more body.

Also, the longevity of natural fibers opens the door to becoming green any time. When you redesign your existing coat, you are recycling. When your fur looks worn out and rickety, please, please do not get rid of it. That is the best time to shear it, color it in red, blue, yellow, or any other

color of your liking, to give it a brand new look. But, if you want to keep the coat the same way, I can simply replace the worn areas—if for some reason, you do not like the sheared look.

In the 2000s and today, shearing and grooving is in style, as well as colored fur and leather, leg warmers, boleros, lingerie, jackets, stoles, capes, trimmings of cashmere, leather, jean, wool, and silk, with sable, mink, and fox collars and cuffs, and jean jackets trimmed with your favored fur. I cover purses to match your existing favored coat, pillows, bedspreads, chairs, ottoman, and couches. The traditional mink coat never goes out of style.

I make leather suits of my own design and matching leather ties to go with them. I do not put buttons and buttonholes on my garments. That is my trademark, because leather is not a warm garment by itself. It is transitional outdoor wear. To me, it is more about the style of it, than keeping a person warm. That's why I do not believe in putting buttonholes, buttons, or zippers on leather. The fewer holes are put on a leather garment, the better it is. You can request to put a fur liner on leather to make it warmer, but that makes it less pliable and causes it to lose some of its softness and flow.



HOW THE BEST IS MADE

First, you have to discover what you love to do in your life. That mystic living inside you needs to come out and flourish like nothing else, so you can make and create a better world. What is that which you cannot wait for in the morning to get up for and accomplish? What is that which drives you every morning? What is it that you say wow to? What is that which when you bring to your people, they cannot wait in the morning to see you? What is that which represents you in this world? What is that which makes you feel so strong, that when you walk in your life, you can mark and leave your footsteps on hard cement, as a signature of yourself, with confidence in your beliefs?

Every morning, when you open the front door of your home, you are opening yourself to the world for good, better, great, grand, extraordinary, or spectacular, things to do. It is up to you what that is that you want to be known for. Right there is the purpose of making a difference in the world—in your own way and your own unique style—your legacy. How will you treat the world, and how will the world treat you? When that time comes, how are you going to leave it for the people still present on this earth as visitors, the same time as you? What is it that you want to make a difference with for humanity in your own positive way?

For every one of us, that comes at different ages. For me, it came at 12 years old. At whatever time, it comes to you, embrace it, love it, and move on with it. Do not look back.

A lady by the name Sharon used to come to my store to sell us newspaper ads. After two years, she was there to sell us magazine ads. After three years, she was selling us flowers. And, after that, she discovered, at a later age, that she loves to do handmade jewelry. Not only that, but she is the best at that. Finally, she is excited and happy with what she does and creates. She found her inner drive, and you can see that with her creations.

The most difficult thing for a lot of us to discover is what makes us happy to do, what it is that we want to do in our lives for a living, to be known for, to excel at, to create, to be recognized for, to have another human being say, "Wow, I did not know that a person like you exists today," to have somebody after meeting you say, "I want to be like you in my life and in my own practice." Success in life is discovering and doing what you love, what you are born to do, and is common sense. In school, you learn to refine your love. It is that simple.

I was blessed very early in my childhood to find out what it is that moves me, in the colorful world and universe we live in. What I love to do in my life—there was no doubt about that, and there was nothing to stop me. I wanted to give people a new meaning of experience in the art of the fur and leather world, the wonders and longevity of natural fibers that I was involve with. I wanted to give people an extraordinary feeling and experience that, maybe, not too many are willing, or care to give, for various reasons. Just like what one of our country song says, that is all I gave some; but, some give it all to see a smile on people's faces, to capture that core of inner feeling that we get two or three time in all our lives. My idea is to make that experience not just two or three times in our life, but every time we meet. With my art and personality, you know exactly which one I mean—the extra adrenaline we get in an emergency in life. I want to give people the same adrenaline of smiles and happiness with my art and the experience they get after they

meet me, NOT from an emergency. I want to see their faces change into an out of this world look, a bright face that just experienced grace going through them like no other. With my art and creativity, the satisfaction I get it is indescribable. There is nothing better in this world for me when I capture in my photographic memory, that moment of extraordinary happiness I see in people's faces. It is priceless. And, for me, life is all about that. I surround myself with people that have positive feelings and attitudes in general about life. We do not need negativity in the process, because life, the only way I know it, is wonderful. It is so beautiful, love it and cherish it, every second. I want to capture those moments of people's lives and make them say WOW. Every one of us wants to live as long as possible to experience the natural wonders of our great earth and the masterpiece of the human experience.

Even when the time comes to choose our food, we choose the best that we think that is healthy for ourselves. You can check this out at a buffet restaurant. Even though all the food is cooked the same, and it is in the same place, still, everyone goes through it and chooses what they think is the best.

I always try to learn from everybody that I meet in my life, regardless their age, nationality, ethnicity, appearance, religion, or how they are dressed. You will never know what you can learn anytime from anybody that can change your life and your outlook unless you connect with them.

At the same time, I always say, at springtime, when we are outdoors, try to go half way up the hill, and then turn around and look and face back down in the valley. You will be amazed with all the millions of flowers and their spectacular colors. They look amazing, like a beautiful bouquet, with no end, like a perfect picture, like a portrait. They smell like nothing else, all of those thousands of flowers put together. Then when you come down, close to all this

beauty and start walking around in them, you will be amazed one more time, in a different way. What a change, what a different transformation you encounter when you come close and personal with that beauty. You come to find out and realize that the beauty from up high is not so beautiful when you come close to it. It is surprising in a big way that some of those beautiful flowers have no smell at all. Some of them have thorns that can scratch you if you touch them, but they smell good. Some of them can be poisonous. That is exactly how we humans being are.

For me, every day has its experience and learning process. Do not leave things to do tomorrow if you can do it today, because tomorrow has its own projects to do, and its own share of puzzles to solve. Do not steal hours from the next day after midnight. If you stay up after 12:00 midnight, you are stealing hours from your next day, and, if you steal hours from the next day, you automatically will not be able to be present 100% to enjoy the wonderful things that life has to offer. You could miss what was in store for you.

TOMORROW—what a graceful word. Tomorrow has its identity, beauty, heartbeat, trip to the unknown, psychological experience, surprises, contributions, garden of flowers, secrets to reveal to you, happiness, path of twist and turns, learning process, new people to meet that can change one's life and life style. Tomorrow, you can get up just like any other morning to do your routine. But, that particular tomorrow, you wind up doing something completely different, unfamiliar to you. It can take you to a place that you never thought you would be in a millions of years. That is what TOMORROW means to me.

Under any circumstances, PLEASE DO NOT base your tomorrow's happiness on material possessions or expect others to make you happy. PLUS, we have to be real and think. Keep in mind also that tomorrow is like a promissory note that might never come for some of us.

Remember, I believe all the people that we deal with on an everyday basis play a role in our lives. Some of them have a big impact, and they are about 100,000,000 of them that come through in our lifetime.

In my humble opinion, they come for six reasons only. The number one reason is for good. The number two reason is for bad. The number three reason is for plus. The number four reason is for minus. The number five reason is negativity. The number six reason is to multiply.

We make our choices. If you have negative people in your life, you have to let them go yourself, because they will never leave you by themselves. But, so far, I was not able to figure out why people are negative. And, that unfortunately includes some of our own relatives. Always remember, we can only think earthly like, because we are only made from earthly-like materials.

In my case, I wanted to be a bar none master furrier, by perseverance, by not stepping on other people, by knocking at doors to be opened for me. If there were no door, I knocked at the windows to get in. If there was no door or window, I built one.

Ask questions. Believe in yourself, in what you want to accomplish. Get ready every morning. Brush your teeth. Take a shower and go out to make a positive entrance into the world, so people recognize who you are. Learn. Do not be naïve. Lead. Live with your actions and examples. Do not let others take advantage of you, or take advantage of other people. Give your wisdom to others unselfishly. Help others. Help others without being bad to yourself. Do volunteer work, if the circumstances allow, you to. Teach others the best way you can. On this note, I say give it, because by giving you do not lose it. Because you know it in your heart and mind, you own it. Let people know you are real. Be not afraid about anything or of anybody. Never be drunk in public or argue with your other half in front of

others. That shows immaturity. Respect your fellow human being (the masterpiece). Take care of your mother and father or at least make sure one of your siblings does so. Be fair to yourself and others. Do not take advantage of any weak situations. Do not lie. Be as pure as the sunlight. Look, when that sunlight goes through a small crack, right into the unhealthiest and hazardous places in the world, it always stays pure, never is infected in any shape or form. So live your life like the sunlight, by asking questions, because, if you don't ask, you will never get to *Kostantinoupoli* (Constantinople, in Greek). By doing what you love to do, and because natural love comes from within, you don't even know you are doing it. It comes so natural. It comes by itself effortlessly. Say nothing about a person that you cannot say when that person is in front of you. Define your purpose. Define your contribution to this world. Make choices in life. Don't ever regret them, whether they turned out to be good, bad, positive, or negative. When you make bad choices, don't blame others for their bad outcome. Take responsibility. And, if you make great choices with great outcomes, be humble about them.

Thank you very much for reading this book. Thank you for spending your precious time of your life choosing to read about my life and the natural world we leave in. I hope it was worth your time and energy. God bless you. God bless your family and friends. God bless the world, and good health. Thank you, again.

Christos Taltsidis



My mother and father sewing in Chicago



My father nailing down mink skins to the tablet



Me swinging
my daughter
Paulina when she was
2 years old.

My mother, Maria,
Paulina as a baby
and I



My daughter Maria eating the Greek yogurt I describe in the book



My mother with my two sisters
Toula and Debbie



My friend Elias (on the right)
and myself in Pteria, Greece
when we were 15.



When I first came to America



My aunt Maria with her
husband Stathis



My grandfather John (on right) with my family having picnic in Greece



My father drinking water from fountain in Pteria



My uncle Taso & grandfather John



When I was 15 in Greece on the balcony of my house



Christos Taltsidis, the master artist of fur and leather garments alike, will take you on a journey from his early days growing up in Pteria, Greece, the fur capital of the world, to the present day of Christos Furs. With the passion for his talent since the age of 16, he'll shed light on valuable knowledge about fur and leather garments in today's day and age.