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N E I G H B O R S

AUGUST 2021

DeMAIO COUNTRY



Sustainable Boating: Part 1

Paddles With a Purpose

Healthy Snacks on the Go



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Not pictured: Christina DeMaio

Photographed at Tilley Pond



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Bringing People Together... DARIEN NEIGHBORS

In this issue...

Dear Readers,

It is with foot stomping, line dancing, whoop-it-up glee that we present this month's cover feature on the DeMaio family and their three-generation country band Gunsmoke as ongoing proof of the distance we continue to put between ourselves and all that hit our lives last year. Live music is back! ...and what a story we get to tell about how the DeMaio's have been bringing Nashville to Darien and beyond ...for decades.

What a privilege too it is to get to tell you a bit about what Darien Country Club's Kelly Newton and her band of devoted volunteers have been doing for years to raise money for breast cancer research at Stamford Hospital's Bennett Cancer Center through the ladies' division of the annual Paddles With a Purpose tournament. You'll find it in this month's *Giving Back* column.

In this issue you'll also find Part 1 of a two-part series on Sustainable Boating by Darien's Kathy Finnegan and her daughter Emma Janson. Good actionable info there. Leslie McCarthy is in with a great piece on a sustainable gardening project for kids orchestrated by the Garden Club of Darien in partnership with the Darien Library.

Fun to get to share a glimpse of the Darien Farmer's Market in this month's *Our Town* feature and, speaking of great food and eating well, how about that Linda Stephens?! Not only is she back with a great column about healthy snacking when you're on the run, she also just received Best of the Gold Coast honors. Congratulations Linda!

Be sure to catch the helpful column "Now, what?" from Life Solution Center, especially if you're sitting across the dinner table from a recent graduate in need of some assistance charting their next steps. Marc Aquilla has some exciting news about Crescendo Music as well. Carolyn Eddie has contributed her usual flair, this month it's a yummy take on Sweetcorn and Black Bean Salsa though we're still not over last month's strawberry lemonade (that was soooo good!).

As we round the corner into the lovely days of August, we do so with ongoing thanks to the advertisers that make it possible to bring you the stories we find to share with you each issue, including Geary Gallery and Uncle's Deli who we're pleased to welcome to this issue. Wishing you a happy balance of the summer!



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Summer fun in Darien parks

Photo courtesy of Bambi Riegel | riegelpictureworks.com

DeMAIO COUNTRY

BY PAMELA DEY VOSSLER | PHOTOS BY RIEGEL PICTURE WORKS



From left: Nick DeMaio, Christina DeMaio, Jeff DeMaio (at steel guitar), Nick DeMaio, Jr., Rebecca DeMaio, Van Manakas

If notes were people and families were chords, the DeMaio family would be a library of songs written in the key of country, each one occupying their own spot in a harmonic blend of shared passions passed from generation to generation, picked up not from obligation but out of love, respect and commitment to each other and those that came before. With this family, it's innate and it's the stuff that not only launches bands like Gunsmoke, the DeMaio's country group, but keeps them going strong for decades, pulling in family members as they move through the years, whether they appear on stage or not.

...and who wouldn't want in on this? It's fun and deeply rooted in all that makes us whole.

The DeMaio family are older brother Nick, his wife Marilyn, son Nick, Jr. and daughter Christina, younger brother Jeff, his wife Margaret and daughters Jessica and Rebecca, Gunsmoke's guitar player Van Manakas—who may as well be family, and Nick and Jeff's parents—Molly and Pop, the source of all of this, Stamford natives who moved to Darien in 1958, raised their sons here then watched as their grandkids grew up in town as well. The family lost them to cancer, Molly first in 2010, then Pop five years later at the age of 84, just three months after he played his last gig with Gunsmoke, still singing, still playing his acoustic guitar following 22 years in the band with his sons and their 70 gigs a year.

They called Pop the Ambassador, a name bestowed in Nashville for all he did to champion the country music he loved throughout the northeast – the

old stuff, as grits and black-eyed peas as Johnny Cash, Hank Williams and all the other legends he covered with his own band—the Country Singing Pals which he played in for more than 20 years before joining his sons.

Pop came to country by way of cowboy movies starring the likes of Gene Autry, Tex Ritter and Roy Rogers. So, as Pop returned from his years as a minor league player in the Philadelphia Phillies system and began what would become a 50-year career at Communications Corporation in Stamford, his boys were born into a home of live music, musicians, amplifiers, guitars, recording machines and classic country artists such as Ernest Tubb, Ray Price and Merle Haggard on the turntable.

"We didn't really know any other format of music," said Nick who is six years older than Jeff.

"To this day people kind of kid me. (They'll say) 'Everybody knows this Lynyrd Skynyrd tune' and I just don't," said Jeff.

It's something the brothers paid forward: "I remember being in elementary school and not understanding that my friends did not know who Johnny Cash and George Strait were," said Jeff's daughter Jessica, a 2012 graduate of Darien High School (DHS). "I didn't know who Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears were," she recalled, laughing.

"We grew up idolizing our father," explained Jeff.

Whatever he was part of, they wanted in on. Country music? You bet! Baseball? That too! Nick played—in high school, college and in an adult league until he was 30. Jeff played DHS baseball as well. Nick Jr. did too,



The Ambassador



Nick DeMaio



Rebecca DeMaio with her father, Jeff

earning MVP honors his senior year. Christina was a pitcher for the DHS softball team. Her cousin Jessica took over the position when Christina graduated. Both were named All-State. Rebecca was a catcher. Nick coached them.

"We always joke that between the Gunsmoke stage and the baseball field, you could definitely find a DeMaio somewhere," said Jessica who earned her Masters in Education from UCONN and now teaches middle school social studies in Canton, CT. She returns to Darien each summer, this year as assistant camp director at the Middlesex Club, and gives private pitching lessons in her spare time.

While Jessica took 10 years of piano lessons growing up, knows when an instrument's out of tune or a song is in the wrong key and can pull up the needed chords when someone is sorting out a song, she, with her mom and Aunt Marilyn, pull their weight with Gunsmoke as the band's biggest fans.

...and they're as much a part of it all as if they were on stage, like Rebecca, Nick, Jr., Christina, Jeff and Nick are.

"My sister-in-law and I always joke that we should really have roadie shirts because we're the ones packing the coolers to make sure they have food and everything they need when they're on the way to a gig ...all those little behind-the-scene things we do to support them," said Margaret, an instructional aide at Holmes School, who makes it to most of Gunsmoke's concerts, along with Marilyn—the office manager at the Darien Community Association, and Jessica.

Rebecca, DHS Class of 2015, found the saxophone in the seventh grade and never looked back. She played in the jazz band at Middlesex Middle School, DHS and also UCONN where she earned a degree in business. She works at indeed.com by day. Most nights, at least in the summer when most of their gigs are scheduled, you'll find her on stage with Gunsmoke which morphed to make room for her passion.

"My senior year in high school, my Dad said, 'Hey, why don't you get up and do a few songs?' and I said 'Dad, it's country music. What are you talking about?'" recalled Rebecca, not at all sure how a sax might fit into a traditional country band.

Jeff and Rebecca went to work sorting arrangements that have ultimately given the band a uniquely bigger sound thanks to her sax. She has recently taken on some vocal duties as well, having first sung with Gunsmoke at



Van Manakas (left) with Nick DeMaio, Jr.

Norwalk City Hall when she was just 10 years old.

Christina, DHS Class of 2009, is an opera singer educated at the New England Conservatory of Music who now lives in Portsmouth, NH where she teaches voice, provides vocal coaching at youth theatres and works as well for a New York-based voice academy. Despite being enormously shy as a child, she first sang with Gunsmoke at 13 years old, buoyed by the family at her back.

"When I first started singing with them, it was just like they've got you. You feel supported. There's a trust there that comes from playing together ...an enjoyment, a bond," recalled Christina.

She now takes the stage with the band whenever she can. In fact, she plans her vacations around the group's busiest weeks in summer.

Her brother Nick, Jr., DHS Class of 2007 who earned his Masters at Cornell, is an architect at Cerrone Architects in Fairfield, CT, and Gunsmoke's drummer. He came to his instrument early, on pots and pans before he could walk. He moved on to a starter drum kit at two years old. By the third grade, he'd progressed enough to play a song or two now and again with Gunsmoke. While ultimately the guitar claimed the lion's share of his musical attention, he continued to fill in when Gunsmoke needed a drummer and took over the sticks for good eight years ago.

"I never felt any pressure to join. I just really wanted to step in and start playing with them," said Nick, Jr. Though he acknowledges the challenge of balancing an accelerating career, life with his new wife (he married Kass Carrara—also of Darien, in July 2019) and his commitment to Gunsmoke, he is deeply attached to Pop's legacy. "We were extremely close ...and I got to share the stage with him for four or five years before he got sick," explained Nick, Jr. "... (the music) is something that happened long before I came along so I want to keep it going as much as I possibly can."

Jeff discovered the steel guitar when he was 12 years old from one of Pop's bandmates who taught him how to play. He spent hours in his family's basement knocking around on instruments with friends and traveling with Pop on frequent trips to Nashville. Nick came along with the bass and vocals after college. Pop got them their first gig through his contacts. They played

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Christina DeMaio with The Ambassador (left) and her father, Nick DeMaio (right)

for free. The owner liked what he heard and the following they brought with them. He gave them the first of what became years of paid gigs at bars and clubs throughout the area.

Already good, they improved. A lot. Pop retired from his day job and signed on as promoter, manager and member of the band. He got Gunsmoke into better jobs such as town green concerts and country music festivals. They played a tour for George H.W. Bush when he was President and performed for George W. Bush. They wrote and recorded music, were invited to join the Nashville-based Country Music Association and opened area concerts for artists including Hank Williams Jr., Waylon Jennings and Garth Brooks. ...and they attracted the legend-among-musicians Van Manakas to the band.

"When we were young and would see Van perform in other shows, his ability on the guitar was intimidating," said Jeff of the nerve-induced foot-dragging that stalled their invite to him to join Gunsmoke. "We had no idea



From left: Jeff DeMaio, Barbara Bush, President George H. W. Bush, Nick DeMaio, The Ambassador



From left: Nick, Jr., Kass, Rebecca and Jessica



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how nice a guy he was. ...As great a player as he is, he's a better person. It's such a privilege to play with him. It still has me looking forward to each and every gig," Jeff added. That was 10 years ago.

"Once my father-in-law joined the band, it really changed things," said Margaret, a Stamford native who met Jeff at a gig during Gunsmoke's earliest years. "He could focus on getting them good jobs," while Jeff and Nick focused on their day jobs. Nick ran a fitness company until moving over to DHS where he tapped into his master's degree to teach and coach softball. Jeff, a Sacred Heart University graduate, is an A/V specialist working with Fortune 500 companies and the Darien School System. The band is their avocation, as it is for all Gunsmoke members except Van who is the band's only full-time musician.

"My father-in-law could not have been prouder to play with his sons," added Margaret. ...And later still with his grandchildren as well. It's a gift he bequeathed to his sons.

"I turn to my right every night and I'm like, 'Wow. My daughter's there,'" said Jeff, as tickled now at his daughter's presence in Gunsmoke as when she first joined them on stage, as is Nick with Nick, Jr. and Christina.

"When I think about how (Nick and Jeff) first started and I think of my father-in-law and all the values he instilled in us, his children and his grandchildren, and how they're all carrying this out on the stage, I still get the chills," added Marilyn. "It was a wonderful bond we had with him and now that he's gone, that continues through the music. He really was such a special man," she continued.

"Music is family and also family is music in our case," said Rebecca.

"We're all sharing that passion, whether it's my mom, my aunt and I singing from the sidelines or them up on stage, it's kind of just a living lesson of how important the family bond is," said Jessica, "...the experience doesn't get old for us. It's a part of us," she added.

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For more on the DeMaio's and Gunsmoke, visit gunsmokeband.com.



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