

# peter&anna ELIOPOULOS

He was 21, born in Greece. She, an Italian-Canada teenager, five years his junior. Smitten kittens, the Toronto pair.

Less than three years later, the young, attractive couple, with eyes for each other and a shared vision for the future, wed. Melding their entrepreneurial spirits, old world values and tireless work ethics, Peter and Anna Eliopoulos have been partnered in love and livelihood since they married in 1979 and operated a restaurant tavern in Etobicoke.

The start of a successful mom-and-pop enterprise?

Yes and no.

Underscore successful, prefix it with wildly and let's redefine enterprise as empire. And, yes, with three daughters, aged 26, 24 and 21, they're very much a mom and pop. Albeit today, he at 51 and she at 46, and married for 27 years, the Eliopoulos family's extensive York Region-based business, isn't stereotypical.

Nor is their story ...

# *Spartan* GENEROSITY

BY CHRIS TRABER | COVER PHOTOGRAPHY BY SJOERD WITTEVEEN





Returning to his native village; Potamia, Greece; Peter Eliopoulos purchased the mountain-top property and arranged the construction of this Greek Orthodox church named in honour of Saints Peter and Paul.

It begins in Potamia, a small Greek village hard against a small mountain.

“Well, it’s more like a big hill,” said Mr. Eliopoulos with a coy grin of his Spartan birthplace.

Immigrating to Toronto in 1967, the Eliopoulos family settled near Jane and Wilson, a significant distance from the main Hellenes community on the Danforth.

Regardless, Mr. Eliopoulos fondly recalls, as a 12-year-old, living in a cramped but cosy house with his two uncles’ families. After school, at one uncle’s restaurant, he worked the cash register while standing on a milk crate. The kid with the easy smile and innate savvy learned English, played hockey and kept his eyes open. To help out, the youngster delivered newspapers, not just one of Toronto’s dailies, but all three, including the long-gone Telegram. The boy augmented his timely deliveries with Christmas cards for his clients. Public relations and customer service, it seemed, was in his blood.

“It’s in my genes,” he said, comfortably draped in a showroom easy chair in the cavernous Vaughan head office where byPeterandPauls.com serves as the cornerstone for a diversified amalgamation of hospitality and entertainment companies that celebrate their 25th anniversary in May.

“Sure, I like things and you have to have money to get them, but it’s not all about money. It’s about making people happy.”

After high school, business studies at Seneca College confirmed what he already knew.

“School wasn’t my kind of thing,” he said. “I was more hands-on, practical and applied common sense.”

Entrepreneurial and fearless, he worked the family restaurant, shifted into the clothing business, all the while organizing teen dances and parties as an alternative to community association get-togethers. At one point, he was promoting major downtown Toronto events with imported headline acts.

Life partners, the Eliopouloses became business partners. After selling their first establishment, they bought into a gourmet bake shop at Keele and Steeles, straddling the Toronto-York Region border. It was named Paul’s French Food. The name stuck and was incorporated into the current nomenclature.

“We didn’t know a thing about bakeries,” said Mrs. Eliopoulos, “but we got into catering and gift baskets and that’s where it all started.

The pair’s wares were a hit. Customers clamored to take goodies home or as gifts. The little

bakery grew as did their reputation for quality, novel tastes and presentation.

Ever vigilant to what’s vague or vogue, and eager to satisfy is innate bent for the hospitality and entertainment industry, Mr. Eliopoulos became a partner in Papparazzi, a flashy, upscale nightclub in Richmond Hill. It became “the” scene at which to be seen.

Company director of communications, George Tsioutsoulas, first met the Eliopouloses years ago as a guest at one of their parties.

“Peter’s a friend and I knew him before he became my boss,” he said. “He’s the straw that mixes the drink. He’s a larger than life character. He knows how to throw a party. He is the party. He loves to see people having fun.

“What I remember most about his events is that the details have details.”

The intonation was that if divine intervention, or the powers that be, helped restore the Eliopoulos’ fortunes, those less fortunate would be tended with generosity and kindness.

As their enterprises bloomed, the late 1980s recession slowly eroded the hospitality industry. byPeterandPauls.com wasn’t exempt. Real estate holdings anchored a downward spiral, leaving the couple with nothing.

“It was huge,” said Mrs. Eliopoulos. “We lost it all and had to start from scratch.”

Mr. Eliopoulos nods. “It was a very difficult time in our lives, to go to the bottom with a family to support.”

Mr. Tsioutsoulas recalls how the couple regrouped, oblivious to the trauma, focusing on the remedy.

“They started at the beginning again,” he said. “They started working seven days a week and made the business bigger and better than before.”

Today, the privately held stable of companies, including several posh banquet, conference and event venues, a thriving gift basket business, catering, special events, photography and video and show staging services employs more than 600 people. Annual revenue is proprietary, but the business, admittedly in growth mode, grosses many millions.

To put the company’s hospitality businesses into perspective, since 1982, they have organized 66,350 parties for 5.9 million guests who have imbibed 28.9 million cocktails.

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Anna and Peter Eliopoulos at the annual Venetian Ball.

The common denominator for those impressive figures continues to be the Eliopouloses themselves.

"We're out there," Mrs. Eliopoulos said. "We've got a lot of tools but we're still hands-on."

Her husband added, "Service is all important. That's what customers are looking for and that's what's lacking in a lot of industries. We're all about innovative, creative customer service."

In truth, customers are not the only ones the Eliopouloses serve.

Mr. Eliopoulos' kind, hooded eyes glimpse skyward.

"I kind of made a little promise," he said.

The intonation was that if divine intervention, or the powers that be, helped restore the Eliopoulos' fortunes, those less fortunate would be tended to with generosity and kindness. And the promise is being kept, with major interest.

As their businesses recovered, Mr. Eliopoulos returned to his Greek village. He bought the property comprising the small mountain and built a church. It is named Saint Peter and Paul after two venerated Greek saints. The land surrounding the peak-top church has paved roads and is fully functional with vineyards. He hinted that the project is merely in its infancy. The olive oils and honey he imports are a clue.

At Yuletide, the couple transforms their stately Bellagio event venue into a Christmas wonderland for more than 350 children in need.

"It's all about giving back," he said. "It's priceless. At Christmas, to walk in and see those kids' smiles is a totally incredible experience."

Together, the Eliopouloses are also fundraising stalwarts, supporting a number of community initiatives. To date, they have helped raise more than \$700,000 for the Hospital for Sick Children through their annual golf tournament. Last year, they served as 2006 co-chairpersons for the glitzy Venetian Ball in support of the Villa Charities Foundation, which benefits the aged and individuals with intellectual disabilities. Their annual disco throwback Studio 54 party raises money and awareness for the Princess Margaret Hospital

Foundation and its breast cancer research.

Villa Charities Foundation executive director Laura Dal Bo has worked closely with the Eliopouloses on the Venetian Ball. The 2007 event, scheduled for October 4, is chaired by Mrs. Eliopoulos.

"They are amazing," Ms Dal Bo said. "It was a lot of fun. The thing that drove them was their desire to raise as much money as we could. Last year was a record with just under a half million dollars raised."

"They don't do it for the fame, even though that comes with the event. They do it from the goodness of their hearts. They both get very involved, but they also bring their family in. That's so important because we look to get the next generation involved and Peter and Anna have passed that sense to their children."

Mrs. Eliopoulos, a breast cancer survivor, says the experience and those of the past have served the couple well.

"I've learned to appreciate the moment," she said. "I used to get stressed. Now, I walk away and start up the next day. There's more balance in life now. It's put family in focus."

Mr. Eliopoulos echoes the sentiment.

"In this high speed world, you have to take a step back, put the brakes on and get back to basics," he said.

The couple continue to oversee operations. She manages the busy gift basket and promotional item wing. He, as creative director, modestly suggests he merely keeps an eye on trends.

The couple, successful in business, are equally proud of the strength of the marriage.

"Peter said we'd be married the second he saw me," Mrs. Eliopoulos said with a mischievous smile.

"That was just a line," he retorted with a wink. "It just worked out that way."

"Obviously, we get along," she said. "The secret in business, I think, is that we bounce a lot of ideas off each other. There's lots of brainstorming. The secret in marriage is the give and take."

"It's definitely not an easy thing, having your wife working with you," he said. "There were times when she said she wanted to quit."

The smiles they share silently suggest they're both glad that didn't happen.

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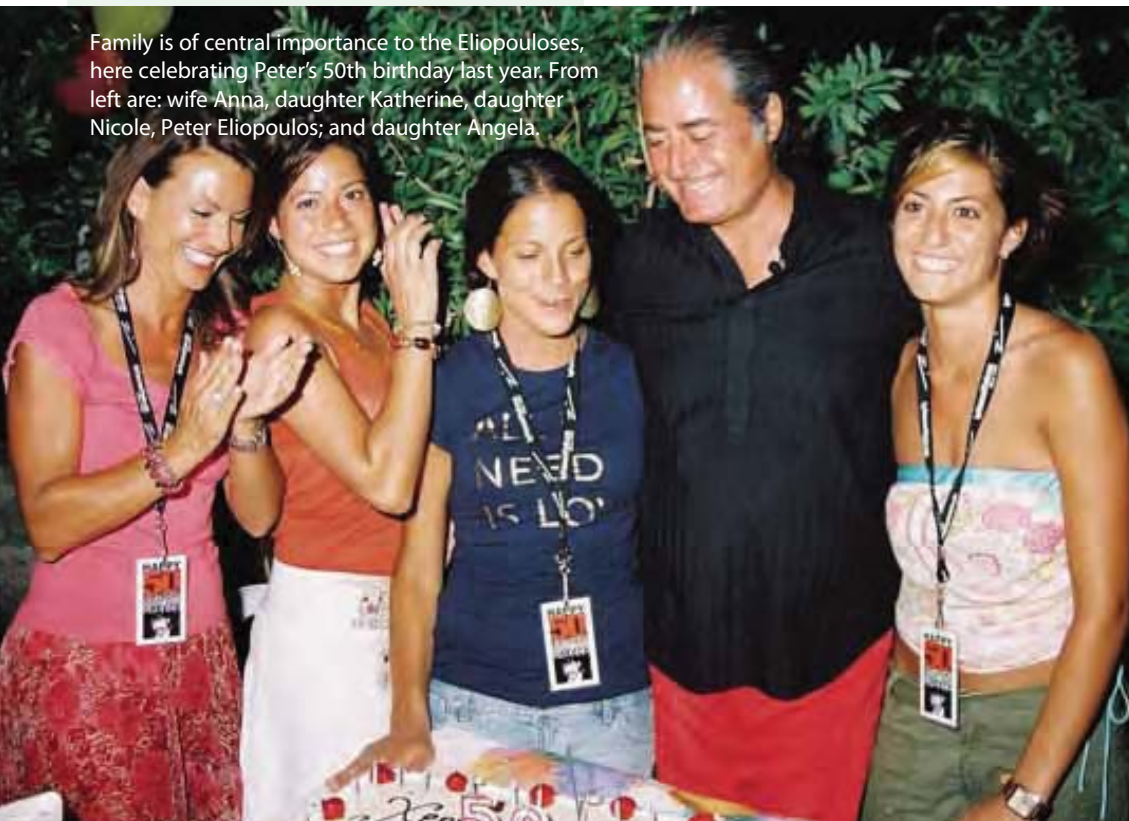
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Family is of central importance to the Eliopouloses, here celebrating Peter's 50th birthday last year. From left are: wife Anna, daughter Katherine, daughter Nicole, Peter Eliopoulos; and daughter Angela.

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