

BUSINESS/REAL ESTATE

Couple lives the American dream

By Lorie McCormick

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In today's world, we often forget how lucky we are to be Americans. We worry about whether our dreams will come true, while others dare to dream; and we curse ourselves for making the wrong choices, while others yearn to choose.

Not long ago, across the ocean in Poland, Didi and Danny Novak saw a light — a shining light of freedom of which they longed to be a part.

As members of Poland's "#1 Pop-Music Group" "Happy End," Didi and Danny had been performing six or seven concerts a day and traveling extensively when they decided to take a chance and head to America — the land of opportunity.

"I didn't like the system [in Poland]. It was against my sensitive nature — too controlling," Danny seriously reflects.

So in 1983, with help from the Polish Art Agency and a lot of "under-the-table payments to get things done," they packed their bags with "no regrets and no looking back" and headed to Chicago.

After learning English by watching "Magnum P.I." and "Three's Company," the duo moved to California in 1985.

In April 1991, they settled in Chicago, where they operated a popular Polish-American banquet hall called "Didi" for six years.

Didi then needed a vacation and had heard about Sarasota through an acquaintance. Danny told Didi to take some much-needed time off and sent her to Sarasota armed with instructions: Don't buy a house. "Then she called and said, 'I have found a great place. I fell in love,'" explains Danny.

That was two years ago, in February 1997. Wanting to share their talents, Didi and Danny purchased David Michael's Restaurant on St. Armands Circle, where the food is as tempting and unique as

the live piano music that enlightens every nook and cranny of the cozy restaurant. While Didi and Danny share the responsibilities of running the restaurant, they each have additional roles. Danny, decked out in formal attire, graces the keyboard with his talented fingers, while Didi dazzles guests with kindness as she greets them at the door.

While Danny is an accomplished pianist, the trail that led him to his destiny was not always black and ivory. His first musical instrument was an accordion that he began playing when he was 8 years old. "I was so upset 'cause I had to carry this thing to my lessons, and then someone stole it. I was so happy I didn't have to carry this thing around!" he laughs. It was then that Danny turned to the keyboard.

In 1975, Danny's vision became a reality with the formation of "Happy End." As a composer, lyricist, pianist and singer, Danny took the band on a journey to the top of Poland's charts and introduced the Western culture he held close to his heart.

Meanwhile, Didi was pursuing her singing and acting talents as an amateur when, in fall 1976, Danny "discovered" her. "It was my secret dream [to be a star]," she laughs.

Of course, as far as Danny was concerned, Didi was already a star — at least in his eyes. "When I saw her, my knees were weak," he blushes.

While working with your spouse has its pluses and minuses, Didi says that she and Danny have a good working relationship. "We trust each other's ideas and judgement. We try to give each other space to grow and learn," she explains.

Judging by their success, their method must work.

In addition to performing together and running several successful businesses, Didi and Danny have raised two talented children, Raphael, 19, and Michelle, 12, who both have a keen interest in music.



The Novaks perform in their home studio.

While David Michael's keeps the couple busy, they admit that they miss performing and would love to entertain local residents possibly at elegant black-tie functions or fund-raisers.

Adding to his list of over 500 songs and 40 records and cassettes, Danny continues to work on new musical projects including a collection of Jewish favorites that everybody knows and loves.

Overwhelmed with joy to be part of this wonderful country and all the opportunity it offers, Danny wrote a tribute entitled "Let Me Be Your Child, America," which he sings with the kind of enthusiasm and commitment that would make any American feel proud...from sea to shining sea. □