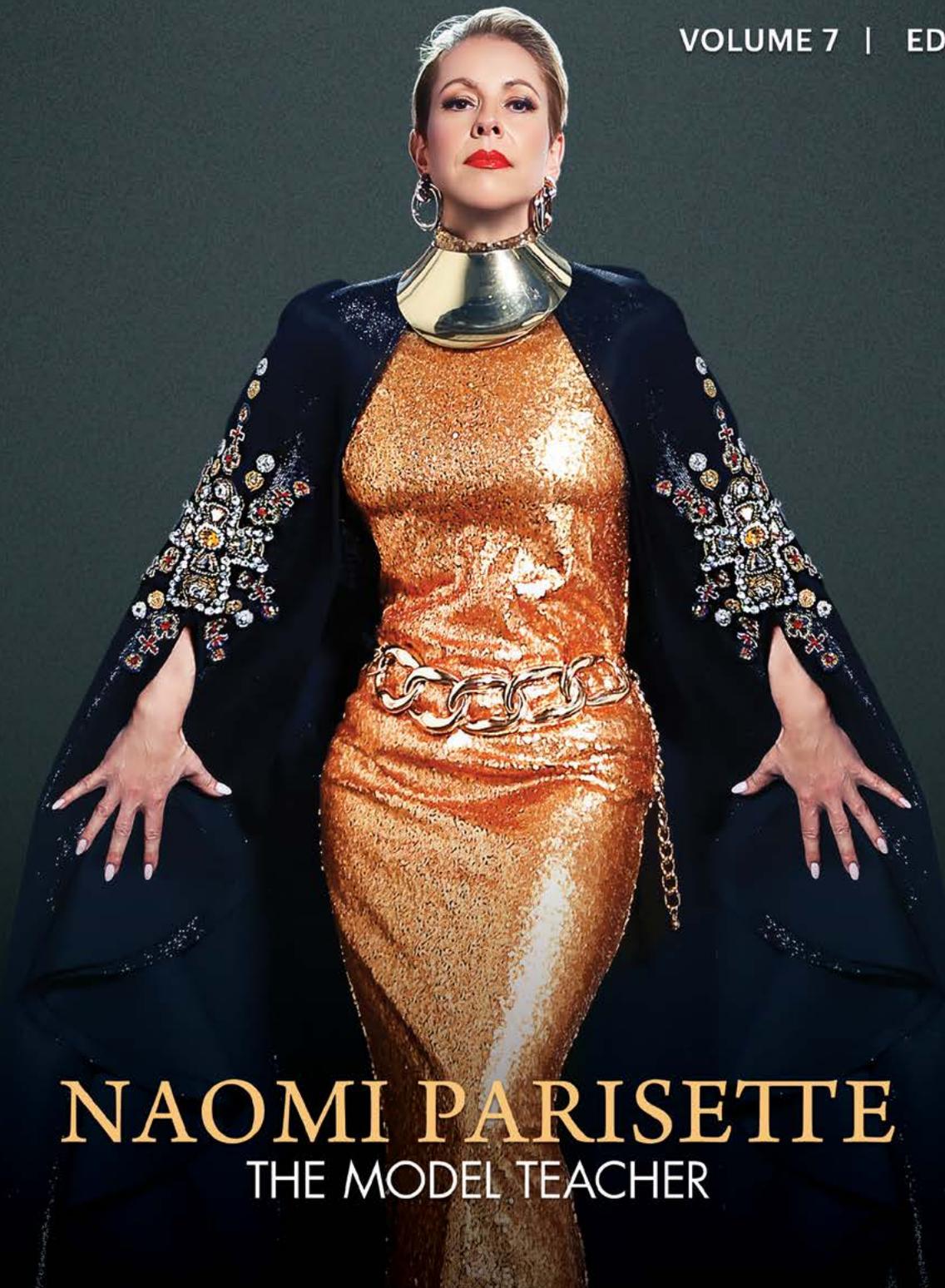


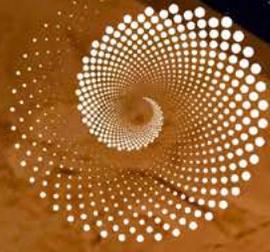
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# CHIC

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Sheryl Aronson



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David Tupaz

Photo by Jaime Lim

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On behalf of *Chic Compass Magazine*, we would like to thank Anna Gomes and Via Brasil for hosting our "A Time of Giving" launch party.

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**Chanelle Hayes-Sessions**  
EDITOR

## From the Editor

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As the season of giving approaches, we're reminded of what a community can achieve when people come together and how even small acts of kindness matter. In this edition of *Chic Compass*, we celebrate the people and organizations whose generosity (often shown in the quiet, steady ways they give their time, energy and care) and sense of purpose inspire others most during this time of year.

Our cover star, Naomi Parisette, is a perfect example. She balances life on the runway with her work as a high school teacher, but it's her devotion to her students that truly stands out. She guides them with empathy and inspires them to give back. As you read about her journey, you'll see that giving is about more than helping; it's about sharing your gifts and lifting those around you.

This issue also highlights others who embody that same spirit, including Assisting Lives in Las Vegas, formerly the Assistance League of Las Vegas, which in 2026 will celebrate its 50th anniversary and has spent decades improving the lives of children and adults in need through hands-on programs, services, resources and philanthropic initiatives.

We also feature hospitality veteran Richard Femenella. Beyond owning Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys, he devotes his time and energy to supporting the autism community in Las Vegas through the Autism Community Trust and Families for Effective Autism Treatment of Southern Nevada (FEAT), showing that giving extends far beyond his business. Other local organizations are making a difference, like the Foundation to Assist Young Musicians (FAYM), which offers scholarships and mentoring to help rising musicians pursue their careers.

Celebrating the spirit of giving, our wellness expert talks with three inspiring organizations: the Morlon Greenwood Foundation, Vegas for Athletes and Girls on the Run Las Vegas. Each is dedicated to health, hope, confidence and

---

## ON THE COVER

**MODEL:**  
Naomi Parisette

**PHOTOGRAPHY:**  
Jaime Lim (Liquid Star Photography)

**FASHION:**  
David Tupaz Couture

empowering the next generation. This season, they're spreading joy and making a real difference in their own remarkable ways.

Since it's the holiday season, we're also excited to share that the Youth for Youth Holiday Concert is back for its fourth year. The event brings the community together to celebrate local youth talent while supporting this year's chosen charity, The Just One Project, which works to combat food insecurity and assist underserved youth in Las Vegas.

On the topic of faith, we meet Vera Jackson Moore, who is building second chances for herself and others through True Beginnings, an organization dedicated to hope, dignity and renewal for women facing challenges like her own. We also feature singer-songwriter Laura Taylor and saxophonist and recording artist Bryan Thompson, who has collaborated with everyone from Darryl Williams to Babyface. In the business world, we explore how big-box security is reshaping the industry.

As always, our compass takes you around the globe. We'll transport you to Italy with coverage of the annual Venice Film Festival, then to Cody, Wyoming, for a feature exploring the history, art and culture of the American West, and onward to Naples, Florida, a coastal getaway where I spent my

honeymoon this past summer at not one but two of the city's most iconic hotels. In the world of fashion, we take you front row at New York Fashion Week and Art Hearts Fashion's London debut before returning to Las Vegas for the highly anticipated launch of Vegas Fashion Week. Also in Las Vegas, we spotlight Ai Pazzi, an elevated Italian dining experience from Fabio Viviani, and take you inside On Stage Essentials, the store founded by Lady Gaga's sister Natali Germanotta Dolan. With November marking the excitement of the Formula 1 Heineken Las Vegas Grand Prix, we shine a spotlight on the women leading the way in this thrilling city-wide event.

As we close out another inspiring year, thank you for journeying with us as we explore the stories, people and places that define *Chic Compass*. Wishing you a joyful, reflective and connected holiday season, and may the spirit of giving guide the way forward.

*Chanelle Hayes-Sessions*



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Song  
Music*

# THE MODEL TEACHER: NAOMI PARISETTE'S DUAL LIFE OF FASHION AND EDUCATION

---

By Laura Henkel

At 4 a.m., the world is still quiet, but Naomi Parisette's alarm sounds. She slips out of bed before her 6-year-old daughter Emily stirs, moving softly through the house. The ritual is always the same: packing Emily's lunch, checking lesson plans, brewing a cup of tea. On the table sits her model bag, packed the night before with water, herbal teas and a few healthy snacks. Her outfit is a simple black — what she calls her "casting uniform" — practical enough for the classroom and easily elevated for a photo shoot or runway later.

By 6 a.m., she pulls into the school parking lot, one of the first teachers to arrive. The fluorescent-lit hallways soon fill with the sound of lockers clanging, sneakers squeaking and laughter bouncing off tile floors. By 2 p.m., the bell rings and she's racing to the train station, slipping into a parking garage in Nassau County and catching the Long Island Rail Road into Manhattan.

During Fashion Week, the cycle stretches late into the night. By 11 p.m. or midnight, she is finally on the train home, crossing the darkened island before her head hits the pillow — only to wake again at 4 a.m. and begin anew.

"Organization and planning are key," Parisette said. "I live on the adrenaline rush."

At 48, Parisette has carved out an unlikely path: high school teacher by day, runway model by night. To outsiders, the two worlds seem opposed — one grounded in structure and intellect, the other in glamour and spectacle. To her, they are deeply connected.

"At first glance, being a teacher and being a model seem to occupy different universes," she said. "But when you look closer, they share similarities. Both are about expression, identity and challenging norms."

## From Hand-Me-Downs to Haute Couture

As a teenager, Parisette papered her bedroom walls with glossy ads from *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*. She studied the models with fascination, as if decoding another world.

"I loved the beauty and artistry behind fashion ads," she said. "I wanted to be those ads — they were artistic and glamorous."

But her reality was far from glossy. Raised by a single mother in a poor household, she wore hand-me-downs and was often bullied. Those hardships, she says, forged her strength.



*Designer: David Tupaz  
Photography: Jaime Lim  
Model: Naomi Parisette*



*Designer: David Tupaz  
Photography: Jaime Lim  
Model: Naomi Parisette*



*Designer: David Tupaz  
Photography: Jaime Lim  
Model: Naomi Parisette*

"Growing up with just my mother, I learned so much from her about endurance and resilience," Parisette said. "She molded me into the woman I am today. I do not believe that if I had not gone through those hard times, I would be where I am now. It takes facing challenges, overcoming them, believing in your inner strength and trusting a higher power and destiny. There was an inner dream that never left me, a fire that remained despite life's twists. I've had to work hard for every moment, and that gives me appreciation for what I have. I'm forever grateful to the universe, God and my angels for every blessing."

At 17, she longed to move to New York and model, but her mother insisted on college. It was a detour that delayed her dream, yet it would lead her into education — her second calling.

## **A Teacher Who Builds Bridges**

In the classroom, Parisette is as committed as she is empathetic. Her students see someone who both challenges and understands them.

"I absolutely believe that every struggle I endured has made me a better human being," she said. "I'm a more empathetic teacher — down to earth and relatable to my students."

Her influence has extended far beyond her lessons. For more than a decade, she advised Westbury's National Student Council, guiding students as they raised funds for Diaspora Girls' Senior High School in Ghana.

"My students come from a community that also struggles, and asking them to give back was a big ask," she said. "But every year, they did. They knew the girls in Africa had even less. Over a span of 14 years, we built a bus shelter, a water well, toilets, an outdoor science pavilion, sent feminine hygiene products so the girls wouldn't miss class, even jerseys so they could form a soccer team. They saw what a big impact our efforts had."

The Ghanaian students responded with gratitude, sending thank-you letters and, one year, a hand-carved wooden clock that hangs in her classroom.

In her words, "That clock is a reminder of them. Just knowing I helped makes my life meaningful."

Her influence rippled back home, too.

"Seeing students graduate is always a proud moment," she said. "But seeing one become an English teacher because they wanted to be like me — that was the biggest form of flattery and such a humbling experience."

## **Facing Death, Choosing Life**

For years, Parisette gave everything to others, leaving little for herself. Then her body gave way.

"I was in the hospital with my kidneys and liver failing, fighting pancreatitis after emergency gallbladder surgery. Lying there alone, I thought: This is it. This is how my life ends. I replayed my life in my head and realized I had been living for others, doing what was expected — not what was my passion. I went to college for my mother. I wanted to take a year to model. I still wonder, what if I had? Would I have made it then? Hindsight is 20/20."

The near-death experience became a turning point.

"After that stay, I threw myself into hobbies I'd always wanted to try: skydiving, rock climbing, kayaking," she said. "I've always loved adrenaline and being a little risky. My spirit loves to feel free. Even now, you see it in my photo shoots — I'm the girl darting through traffic for the perfect shot. Going through loss, being at rock bottom, reshapes who you are. I've lost my entire family in four years, I've lost jobs, friends, love, but I still believe in love. I faced death itself and chose to live with courage. As my mom would say: 'Have your good cry, take a deep breath and start again.'"

Faith, she says, underpins it all. "I'm forever grateful to the universe, God, my angels, for every blessing."

## **First Steps on the Runway**

Her first runway show was fittingly for charity on Staten Island.

"I was excited and nervous but also cool and collected," she said. "I felt at home on the runway. I was doing what I loved, finally, and there was overwhelming happiness."

From there, she stepped onto bigger stages: New York, Los Angeles and Miami fashion weeks.

"New York is competitive — you can face thousands at castings," she said. "LA and Miami were arranged ahead, which meant less stress. Walking the runway for Art Hearts in LA was one of my favorites because it's such a long and wide runway."

## **Fashion as Storytelling**

For Parisette, fashion is more than fabric — it's narrative.

"Fashion is undeniably an art form," she said. "Designers are artists who use fabric as their medium. A collection is storytelling. A runway show isn't just clothes — it's performance, with art, music, choreography. From history, we see clothing as power, protest, identity. Punk in the '70s was rebellion. Couture was status. Fashion is art that functions immediately — it's how we present ourselves to the world."

At 48, her presence on the runway challenges fashion's obsession with youth.

"For so long, fashion was geared to the young, marginalizing older individuals," she said. "But things are changing. Designers now feature mature models — Jacky O'Shaughnessy, Carmen Dell'Orefice — and brands like Stella McCartney and Chanel show style is ageless. Age is just a number and doesn't define beauty or drive."

Her philosophy is clear: "Fashion should empower, not confine."

## **Neon Vests, Healing Light**

One of her most personal runway moments came at a fashion show in Miami in 2024, held during the festivities

surrounding Art Basel.

"My father and I had been estranged since I was 5. He reappeared after an Alzheimer's diagnosis. Helping him clean out his car, I found all his neon work vests. I knew he wouldn't return to work. I gave them to designer Jose Alexander, who upcycles clothing. He turned them into a neon dress. I walked that gown down the runway. Jose made something beautiful from a complicated situation."

It was reconciliation stitched into fabric — fashion as memory and healing.

## **Between Chalkboards and Catwalks**

Some days, Parisette moves from red pens to couture gowns in a single breath.

"Grading essays requires patience and analysis. Couture is artistry and drama," she said. "The mental switch is sharp, but both are fulfilling in different ways."

Her daughter Emily takes it in stride.

"She's proud but down-to-earth about it," Parisette said. "Sometimes she'll see a magazine cover and say, 'Wow, you're on the cover, Mommy! You're so pretty.' She loves playing dress-up, and walking around in my heels is one of her favorite things to do."

For her students, discovering their teacher's modeling career is equally surprising. She uses it as a lesson: you don't have to fit into one box.

## **Recognition and Renewal**

In 2024, the Chick-fil-A Leader Academy named Parisette one of 10 outstanding educators nationwide.

"I was beyond shocked," she said. "My students and colleagues had secretly sent in videos. Hearing their words was so moving — it's a memory I'll cherish forever."



*Designer: David Tupaz  
Photography: Jaime Lim  
Model: Naomi Parisette*

Yet she values legacy more than awards.

"I want to be remembered as someone who shifted perspectives," she said. "In fashion, representing women of all ages and sizes. In education, empowering others to find their voice."

## Looking Ahead

Her ambitions remain expansive: walking a Paris runway, appearing in *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*, collaborating with Chanel or Balenciaga.

"Paris is the heart of fashion," she said. "To walk there would feel like the ultimate affirmation."

But prestige isn't her only goal.

"My next endeavor is to meld my two worlds," she said. "I want to use modeling to continue helping the girls in Africa — conducting workshops, helping them pursue fashion, continuing to fundraise for their school. That's the bridge I want to build."

And her message remains steady:

"Be unapologetically yourself, no matter what the world tells you."

## Epilogue: The Runway of Life

Parisette's life arcs like a film: the teenager with walls of *Vogue*, the girl in hand-me-downs, the teacher building wells in Ghana, the patient staring down death, the model striding runways at nearly 50.

She is the mother who packs lunches at dawn, the educator who empowers across continents, the model who reconciles with her past through neon fabric.

Her runway stretches beyond Fashion Week. It runs through classrooms, communities and cultures. Each step is resilience, artistry and faith.

"Fashion should empower, not confine."

And so should life.

*Designer: David Tupaz  
Photography: Jaime Lim  
Model: Naomi Parisette*



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# A LEGACY WOVEN INTO LAS VEGAS: DON AND DEE SNYDER

By Laura Henkel

Once a remote outpost nestled between sunburned valleys and wind-worn mountains, Las Vegas was never meant to be the North Star. As settlers moved onto Paiute lands, the springs of this desert oasis offered only a brief rest for dreamers chasing fortunes farther west. But something happened in the Mojave. People stayed. Drawn by its daring spirit and boundless possibility, they began to shape a city that would defy its desert origins.

Over time, Las Vegas became more than a waypoint. Though long considered the dusty backyard of Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, two cities that profoundly shaped its early development, it forged a distinct identity. It was shaped by the convergence of cultures: the reverence of its Indigenous roots, the grit of ranchers, the shadows of mobsters, the ambition of bankers and the glamour of entertainers. A mosaic of contradictions and collaborations, the city embraced transformation.

Today, Las Vegas stands as a glittering beacon of boldness, perseverance and transformation. People from every walk of life look to this improbable metropolis as proof that vision, community investment and cultural depth can rewrite a place's destiny.

Amid this transformation, a quieter, foundational story has unfolded: the unwavering influence of Don and Dee Snyder.

Together, they helped elevate Las Vegas



*Dee & Don Snyder*

not just in stature but in spirit — ensuring the city's identity reached beyond neon lights and high-stakes gaming to include concert halls, classrooms, professional sports teams and community hubs. Their legacy lives not only in the institutions they helped build but in the values they instilled: culture, education, economic inclusion and a deep commitment to service.

## **Where Roots Meet Vision**

Don and Dee's story begins not in Nevada but in Southern California, where they met while launching their careers in the banking industry in 1969. Don was a management trainee for United California Bank, and Dee was a proof operator and operations support clerk. Their connection was



*Above: Don and Dee Snyder Elementary School contingent at The Smith Center*

immediate, grounded in shared values and ambition. Early in their relationship, Don told Dee he aspired to become the president of a bank. With that vision came sacrifice, as he remained focused on achieving it. Dee wasn't deterred. They married in 1971, united not only by love but by a shared vision for a life of purpose and possibility. Their goals soon took them across the globe as they embraced opportunities to live abroad and follow Don's flourishing career.

Those early years, marked by constant movement, cultural immersion and professional growth, became the foundation for their lifelong commitment to service and community. Life was anything but dull. Two children soon followed, and they decided that Dee would become a stay-at-home mom when their first child was born. Their third child was born in Las Vegas.

Don recalls, "That decision to be a stay-at-home mom was important to us, and to our best friends at the time. Dee even helped raise their two children during their preschool years."

Before all that, Don grew up on a humble farm in South Dakota. The family had no running water, and an outdoor bathtub served their needs. His early days were filled with chores, church and the quiet rhythm of rural life. A

high school guidance counselor once told him not to bother with college. Like many great leaders, he quietly defied low expectations.

He earned a degree in business administration, graduating with honors from the University of Wyoming in 1969, establishing a lifelong framework for success — one he would later distill in his book "Taking the Lead," a reflection on the values and strategies that defined his leadership in business, banking, gaming and education.

Throughout it all, Don has applied what he calls his Strategic Thinking Model. In "Taking the Lead," he provides a clear presentation of this framework, demonstrating how it guided him through diverse professional assignments. More than a tool for decision-making, it is a playbook for success. Forever the mentor and educator, Don shares it with the same intention that has defined his life's work: to help people, businesses and Las Vegas itself thrive.

That clarity first found expression in banking, where discipline and foresight propelled him steadily upward.

Don's path to Las Vegas wasn't direct but deliberate. Banking became his proving ground, where discipline and vision carried him forward until he was named CEO of First Interstate Bank of Nevada in 1987 — then one of the state's most respected financial

institutions. A decade later, he carried those same values into gaming, stepping into a role that would shape both industry and community. As president of Boyd Gaming, Don was recognized not only for business acumen but for a steady moral compass. He elevated corporate responsibility into a guiding principle and modeled a leadership style where service to the community mattered as much as shareholder return.

Through it all, Dee was there — not as an accessory to Don's success but as an equal partner in vision and execution. More than a spouse, she was the grounding force behind the family's strength and stability (and Don's golf game). Her thoughtful counsel and unwavering support formed the foundation for Don's most public achievements.

"Dee has been my fully engaged partner for the past 54 years," Don reflects. "Her encouragement and support were instrumental to my courage in tackling big, public-facing projects."

## **The Hidden Power of Partnership**

Dee, while not as publicly profiled, is revered in civic and philanthropic circles as a woman of wisdom, quiet leadership and unwavering generosity. She and Don have worked in tandem for decades — not through grandstanding but through thoughtful, often behind-the-scenes influence.

That influence came into sharp focus on a single day when they made two major philanthropic gifts — bold commitments that signaled deep belief in the causes they supported and set a tone for others to follow. Don would later describe it as "the best day of our lives," crediting Dee's instincts as equal to his own.

"We've always done this together," he has said. "That's the point."

Dee's board service, event hosting and mentorship — while less publicized — have left a lasting impact on Nevada's philanthropic landscape.

## The Cultural Heartbeat They Helped Build

Don's leadership in the creation of The Smith Center for the Performing Arts remains one of the most visible and enduring contributions to Southern Nevada's cultural landscape.

Before its opening in 2012, Las Vegas — despite its global reputation for entertainment — lacked a true performing arts venue of international caliber. Don, serving as board chair, led the ambitious effort to secure funding and political support, navigating the intricate interplay of personal philanthropy, public-private partnerships and real estate complexities. His leadership even extended into the legislative arena, where he secured rare bipartisan support to pass measures essential to the project — proof of his ability to unite stakeholders across divides.

Often compared to the Lincoln Center in New York and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., this world-class venue became the cultural anchor of Symphony Park. Its stage welcomes Broadway tours, concerts, lectures and ballet performances, bringing to Las Vegas audiences an experience long reserved for America's great cultural capitals. Beyond its glittering performances, the center became a hub for education, drawing thousands of students annually into programs that expand the horizons of future generations.

It is no exaggeration to say that without Don and Dee, this vision might never have taken form. As founding chairman, Don played a leadership role in every phase of development, while he and Dee became its first million-dollar donors. Their generosity set a tone of leadership by example, inspiring the wave of philanthropic support that made the dream a reality. Nestled in the then-nascent Symphony Park, the performing arts center rose as a beacon of civic pride and elevated aspiration. To this day, it stands as their crowning achievement in shaping the cultural identity of Las Vegas.



### Cultural Trailblazers: Building More Than Buildings

If you want to get a project off the ground — or if you want to make a lasting difference in Southern Nevada — you will almost certainly encounter the quiet but steady influence of Don and Dee. From Dee's role on the inaugural board of the Discovery Children's Museum to Don's leadership as chair of the United Way of Southern Nevada (UWSN) board and several other non-profit boards, their fingerprints mark nearly every significant civic, cultural and philanthropic initiative of recent decades.

Dee's commitment to children and community has always reached far beyond her own home. "Her involvement with the Children's Museum as a board member when it was just starting is significant — especially when you see the impact on so many kids in our community," Don shares. Her work is not about titles or recognition but about creating spaces where children can discover wonder and possibility.

At the very moment Don was advancing the performing arts center, he was also leading a capital campaign for a new academic building at UNLV — cementing his influence on both cultural

*Above: January 2018 ribbon cutting for the Don and Dee Snyder Elementary School*

and educational futures of Nevada. These efforts unfolded during the crushing economic downturn of 2008, a period when donor fatigue and institutional hesitation could easily have extinguished momentum. But where others saw insurmountable limits, Don saw opportunity. He encouraged optimism, rallied allies and inspired action. His ability to steady the course at moments of greatest uncertainty is part of what has made his leadership indispensable.

Their influence at UWSN still resonates. Don extended his tenure as chair, reflecting his deep commitment to strengthening the organization at pivotal moments in its growth. Together, he and Dee inspired the creation of the Snyder Circle, a distinguished giving level within UWSN's Tocqueville Society. The Snyder Circle continues to inspire generations of community leaders to give boldly and collectively.

For Don and Dee, UWSN embodied their belief that philanthropy is strongest when rooted in community and shared responsibility. While the giving circle bears their name, it ultimately reflects their philosophy of collective generosity — empowering others to lead with intention, values and purpose.

## Visionaries in Every Arena

Beyond culture and education, Don and Dee have made pivotal contributions to the very identity and trajectory of Las Vegas. In the early 1990s, Don was instrumental in shaping the Fremont Street Experience, forging partnerships among casino leaders and city officials to re-imagine downtown. What was then a declining corridor became a luminous attraction, helping to lay the groundwork for the downtown renaissance that continues to unfold.

In sports, Don played a quiet but decisive role in helping Las Vegas become a major-league city. A private meeting at UNLV in 2014 between Don, then acting president, and Raiders owner Mark Davis catalyzed the events that would lead to the Raiders' move to Las Vegas and Allegiant Stadium. Today, that stadium is not only the home of the Raiders and UNLV football but also a defining landmark of the city's stature as a sports capital.

Meanwhile, Dee's presence — so often behind the scenes — was no less influential. Her style was neither loud nor ostentatious, yet her voice was felt everywhere decisions mattered.

Together, Don and Dee redefined stewardship in Las Vegas. Leadership, in their hands, was never just about building institutions — it was about weaving values into the civic fabric. Their work is not simply legacy-building; it is legacy-living, an ongoing influence that continues to shape the city's story.

## Shaping the Heart of the City

Where others saw Las Vegas as a place of fleeting indulgence, Don and Dee saw a city capable of roots — in its culture, education and civic life. Their belief that a city's soul is shaped by its investments in people, place and purpose guided every initiative they touched.

To fund a building is one thing; to build consensus is another. They did both. They galvanized trust, stewarded long-term vision and proved that institutions

could endure when founded on values. From the revitalization of Fremont Street to the cultural rise of Symphony Park, their projects were not transactional — they were transformational acts of service.

Crucially, their leadership never rested in a single sector. They built an interconnected vision of Las Vegas: where the arts uplift education, philanthropy fuels progress and bold ideas take root even in the harshest economic climates. Their influence ripples across time, continuing to inspire not only what Las Vegas has become but what it is still becoming.

## Education, Equity and the Snyder Standard

Don and Dee have long viewed education as the cornerstone of community transformation. At UNLV, Don served as chair of the foundation, dean of the William F. Harrah College of Hospitality, executive dean for strategic development and acting president — leadership roles through which he helped raise more than \$500 million for the Invent the Future capital campaign, enabling the construction of Hospitality

Hall and the launch of the School of Medicine.

Their shared vision found its most tangible embodiment in 2018, when the Don and Dee Snyder School — a STEAM-focused institution centered on science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics — opened its doors. Equipped with robotics programs and a curriculum designed for the 21st century, the school carries forward their belief that students should be inspired, connected and prepared to thrive.

More than a school, it is a culture shaped by inclusion. Dee helped ensure the institution would not only teach but also nurture, integrating wraparound services that give each child both the tools and the confidence to succeed.

## A Lifetime of Quiet Honor

Accolades have followed Don throughout his career: the President's Medal in 2000, an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree in 2001, designation as a Distinguished Nevadan in 2003, recognition as Nevada's Philanthropist of the Year and induction into the Nevada Business Hall of Fame. In 2025, he will



Above: Don's final Board of Regents meeting. His successor was UNLV President Len Jessup (and Kristi Staab) to his far left

be honored as a distinguished alumnus by the University of Wyoming, a recognition reserved for graduates who exemplify excellence, integrity and profound appreciation for the role of education.

Yet Don consistently deflects credit. "The people around me," he often says, "are the reason any of this was possible."

Every recognition has been shared with Dee. In public remarks and private reflections alike, Don underscores that their achievements are joint achievements. He insists that their legacy is not his alone but theirs together. They were jointly honored as Outstanding Philanthropists in 2023 by the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

Dee herself has never sought the spotlight. She prefers mentorship to microphones, listening to others rather than positioning herself at the center. She often attends community events not as a guest of honor but as a presence — observing, encouraging and connecting. It is her humility, alongside Don's, that magnifies the authenticity of their influence.

### Blueprints from a Life of Service

For younger generations aspiring to shape Nevada's future, Don and Dee's journey offers a clear blueprint:

- Start with values. Integrity, empathy and respect have guided every one of their decisions.
- Don't chase titles. Influence is built through action, not recognition.
- Invest in people. From students to artists to executives, they believe in the power of individuals to spark movements.
- Balance boldness with humility. Big ideas matter, but so does showing up quietly, staying late and treating everyone with dignity.
- Build systems, not monuments. Sustainable impact comes from good policy, good people and community-first philosophies.

These are not just principles — they are lived lessons, repeated again and again in the arc of Don and Dee's shared life.

### A Living Legacy

Don and Dee never set out to become icons of Las Vegas. They simply believed in building a community worthy of pride — for themselves, for their neighbors and for the generations that would follow.

Their story is one of resolve, generosity and extraordinary love — for each other and for the city they helped shape. Concert halls, classrooms and civic spaces may bear their name, but their deeper legacy resides in the people they have empowered, the minds they have opened and the lives they have lifted.

Their legacy is etched into buildings, programs and institutions across Las Vegas. But their greatest legacy, however, may be the one they've built at home.

In the words of their three children: "We are so proud of our parents and the legacy that they have earned over their nearly four decades in Las Vegas. Our respect is based on what they have accomplished professionally, both coming from very humble backgrounds; the community engagement and the leadership roles they have played;

their philanthropy, which has helped so many organizations and has done so much in helping to build the philanthropic infrastructure of Las Vegas; and for them being role models for us, our children and every other person who has observed them lead such impressive and fulfilling lives."

Through every phase of their lives — career, family and philanthropy — Dee's presence has been a constant source of strength. Her devotion to family has never wavered, even as public commitments expanded. Their children, raised in a home built on service and integrity, now continue that legacy in their own lives. Don often recalls with pride Dee's dedication to helping raise their youngest grandson so his mother could return to her career as a teacher — an act of love that speaks volumes about priorities and values.

That enduring devotion, sustained across decades, is as integral to their story as any building or program. It reminds us that behind every grand achievement lies a foundation of simple, steadfast acts of care.

In a city renowned for spectacle, Don and Dee embody what is enduring and profound. Their legacy, like Las Vegas itself, continues to evolve — proof that vision anchored in humility can transform not only skylines but the very spirit of a community.



Dee with her grandkids

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# BRYAN THOMPSON: TIME TO TELL HIS STORY

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By Sheryl Aronson / Photography by Sherman Alford (Sasaphotos)

From the moment I picked up Bryan Thompson years ago from his hotel in San Diego, I knew he was meant for stardom. It seemed to illuminate around him. He had moved from Indianapolis to Southern California, eager to make his name in the contemporary jazz community, and I had been asked, as a music journalist, to take this talented sax player under my wing. Though young and dewy-eyed, he exuded the right amount of poise and confidence, and he was willing to work hard, playing with as many musicians as possible to get his name out there.

The first stop in July 2018 was the Darryl Williams Jam in Temecula. Darryl Williams, a Billboard artist and veteran bass player, not only fronted his own band but had toured the world with Jonathan Butler and shared the stage with jazz luminaries such as Richard Elliot, Dave Koz, Peter White, Mindi Abair and many others. Although Thompson claimed to be nervous, he jumped right in with his soprano sax, blowing notes with warm tones and prolific finesse, exciting the crowd with his artfulness.

That night, I became his LA music mom, watching over Thompson's growth not only as an artist but in his emotional health as well. Slowly and surely, this



*Above: Bryan Thompson*

young man maneuvered his way into the special community of the smooth jazz scene, soon performing with Williams and Brian Simpson and traveling worldwide.

Of course, Thompson paved his own way as a budding musician through his drive, artistry and ambition, persevering from the 22-year-old newbie to

the 28-year-old talent rising to stardom. From the moment he hit Los Angeles, he performed live solo covers on social media, which has given him 15,000 followers on Facebook and 223,000 followers on Instagram.

On his birthday, Jan. 9, 2023, Thompson received an extraordinary present: a phone call informing him



*Above: Bryan Thompson performs with Babyface at the Palms Casino Resort (Pearl Concert Theater), Las Vegas*

that he would be the tenor sax player for Grammy Award-winning artist Babyface. He has been touring with the artist for the past two years and played the Hollywood Bowl with Babyface on Aug. 29. In addition, on Aug. 18, he performed at the Impact Awards with Johnny Gill and at the Indiana State Fair with Babyface. Both Indianapolis natives, it was the first time they had played together in their hometown. Thompson also accompanied Toni Braxton onstage at the Cincinnati Music Festival this past July.

Thompson also performs with his own band and has played at City Winery in Nashville and Atlanta, plus at various venues in his hometown of Indianapolis.

He has performed the national anthem at the 76ers basketball game and the Colts football game.

In 2022, he released his first CD, "P.O.V.," which has attracted close to a million streams to date.

A mother can be proud of her LA son's accomplishments, watching him struggle but continue striving and maturing in his craft. I tell him, "It's time now to tell your story."

Here's my interview with him, conducted at my North Hollywood home during a recent break in his performance schedule.

**Chic Compass:** Tell me about your background growing up in Indianapolis and how you picked up the saxophone.

**Bryan Thompson:** I was raised in Indianapolis. I was the first person in my family to play music professionally. I grew up listening to a radio station in Indianapolis called 100.9, and that's where I heard all the people we know and love today — Brian Culbertson, Dave Koz, Kenny G, Gerald Albright — all those legends.

I started playing music when I was 9, so it's been about 17 years that I've been playing. I got my first saxophone when I was 9.

**Chic Compass:** Did you know then that the sax was your instrument?

**Bryan Thompson:** I was practicing six to seven hours a day at that age. I would play, eat, play, go do something else, then come back and play some more. I had my first gig about six months later. It was a birthday party. Then I did a talent show, and after those two gigs, people started calling.

**Chic Compass:** Did you play by ear, or did you study music?

**Bryan Thompson:** I play by ear. I had music lessons when I first got the saxophone to learn the basics. I'm deaf in my right ear, ironically, so I only have hearing in my left ear.

I started doing gigs locally in Indianapolis. I'd play at churches every Sunday, birthday parties, weddings — anything I could get my hands on. Eventually, I realized how small the city was. I went to one event where the mayor was there, and they asked me to come play. That got me playing a lot of corporate gigs as a teenager. I was 15 or 16 when they were sneaking me into nightclubs.

Eventually, major local musicians started inviting me to play with them, and it kind of snowballed from there.

**Chic Compass:** At what age did you move to LA?

**Bryan Thompson:** I was 22 in July 2018. Once I had done everything in Indianapolis — played everywhere, met everybody — I asked myself, "What's next?"

I kept getting phone calls telling me I needed to go to LA. I didn't know anybody in the smooth jazz community, so when social media came into the picture, I made a lot of videos that went viral. My following built up. I made some connections before I moved out to LA, so I had some groundwork.

It was around the time I met you. I hadn't even been in LA a year. I was playing in Temecula with Darryl Williams, going to jam sessions and the hot spots in the smooth jazz community. You took me to one of those jams and have been my "smooth jazz mom."

**Chic Compass:** I was told to take good care of you by a music promoter who saw your raw talent. You did meet Darryl Williams, who kindly took you under his wing.

**Bryan Thompson:** Darryl Williams was the first person to welcome me into the professional side of the smooth jazz market. If it weren't for him, I don't think I would have gotten such a good introduction to the smooth jazz community. Once I started playing with Darryl, other people became interested. Brian Simpson, the keyboardist, took me under his wing as well. I went to Africa with Darryl, performed at the Long Beach Jazz Festival with him, and had some very great opportunities. Brian Simpson also featured me as his sax player, and we performed all over the world. Adam Hawley, the guitarist, was like a big brother, and I got the chance to do some gigs with him as well.

**Chic Compass:** Why is someone your age interested in smooth jazz?

**Bryan Thompson:** I didn't relate a lot to people in my age group growing up. I think my personality was more



Above: Bryan Thompson out by the pool at the Palms Casino Resort, Las Vegas before performing with Babyface (top), and Bryan Thompson performs with Babyface at the Pearl Concert Theater, Las Vegas



*Above: Bryan Thompson performs at Zaya DTLA (Downtown LA)*

centered around music with an orchestral and jazz-like quality. I also am paying homage to my parents and family for exposing me to that music as I was growing up.

**Chic Compass: You play different types of saxophones. Do you have a favorite?**

**Bryan Thompson:** The first saxophone I got was an alto sax. It was the most common. The second one I got was a soprano. I saw Kenny G playing it and wanted to play the straight sax. I think I purchased a cheap one for \$200. I picked up the tenor sax later because

I was too small to play it. When I was about 15, I got a tenor sax. The tenor has really been where I found a voice. I love the sound. I love writing songs on it.

**Chic Compass: Talk about your voice. What does that mean to you?**

**Bryan Thompson:** People give saxophonists a lot of crap for trying to sound like Kenny G. When you're starting out on an instrument, there has to be some form of inspiration. For example, when I listen to Jazmin Ghent, I get a Kirk Whalum vibe; Kenny G had a Grover Washington inspiration. No matter how much you try to emulate, imitate or copy an artist, you'll still sound like you. While I may have influences from many

players, I still sound like me. When I pick up the tenor sax, I feel like I can't be Kenny G. I found a good medium on the tenor where I can have a clean, vibrant sound.

**Chic Compass: You're playing with Babyface all over the world. You just played the Hollywood Bowl. How did that happen?**

**Bryan Thompson:** We're from the same city, Indianapolis. In fact, we did our first show together in our hometown in August, which was amazing.

I scored the gig with Babyface in 2023. I was sitting outside my apartment when I received a call from management saying I got the job.

I had met Babyface back in 2017 and had gone to several of his concerts. I knew his best friend from Indiana, who was his music manager. I had been building my reputation, so when Babyface was looking for a new sax player around 2019, I tried to put my name in. It didn't materialize.

They kept the current sax player for a couple more years and reached out to me from time to time, and I sent them my information, but it never happened. The third time around, I got a call from his best friend saying, "Kenny wants to see you play your alto saxophone, play something soulful, they want to see you dance, they want to see you sing."

I thought, "Wow, there's a whole lot of things they're asking for." I sent them all the clips and videos. They called me to come in for an audition, which was in Hollywood. At the time, I was in Florida. It was Christmas time. They said we need you for an audition on Jan. 7. I had just enough Southwest Airlines points to get a one-way trip because I didn't have any money. I used that to book a free flight from Orlando to California.

I did the audition on Jan. 7, and I think we did some more stuff on Jan. 8. On Jan. 9, 2023, I was celebrating my 26th birthday when I received a phone call

that said, "Hey, you're on the team!"

**Chic Compass:** That's a great story, Bryan.

**Bryan Thompson:** One of the best things about working with any major artist is the credibility it adds. Babyface is a 13-time Grammy Award-winning, platinum-selling artist. If they choose you, it shows you've reached a level of professionalism that defines your career.

**Chic Compass:** There's another very special person you've worked with, Toni Braxton.

**Bryan Thompson:** I met Toni after a video I shared around 2019. I had just covered one of her songs online, and it went viral. She shared it, and after that, someone messaged me saying, "Toni really likes your video. Can we get your contact information?" About two hours later, I got a phone call from this number. She said, "This is TB. Love your video." I was like, TB?! Then I stopped for a minute and started screaming. Oh my God, it's Toni Braxton.

We've had a relationship — whenever she's touring or if I'm able to hop on the show with her, it's been great. The latest one we did was the Cincinnati Music Festival, with about 40,000–50,000 people. She's going to be performing in London for a couple of weeks in December, and guess where I'll be? I'll be in South Africa with Babyface.

**Chic Compass:** Let's end by talking about you.

**Bryan Thompson:** I've been doing my own shows in a few cities and dropped an album in 2022 called "P.O.V.," a limited-release project. Three songs gained moderate traction, and we're almost at 1 million streams. My heart is really in being an artist. I love writing my own music and putting together my own show.

**Chic Compass:** What do you dream about for your future?

**Bryan Thompson:** I've been telling



myself that right now I'm known as a good saxophonist, not necessarily as a good artist. I want people to see more sides of me. One of my dreams is to have a couple of hits.

I want to have some songs that resonate with a large audience. Then secondly, what I would tell anybody coming up

as a musician is to work hard, and you'll be great. When I look at how Babyface chose me or how Toni Braxton has allowed me to play with her onstage, that means something. Credible artists cosign for you. That's a clear indication you should continue doing what you're doing.

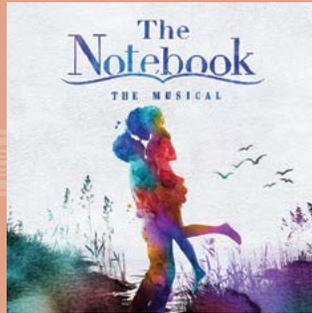
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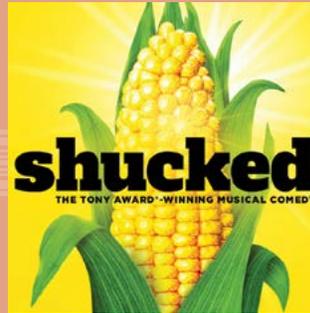
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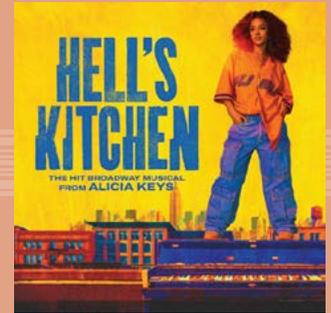
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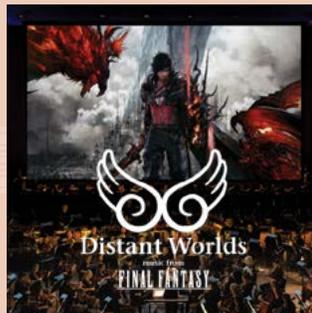
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# NAPLES, FLORIDA

NEWLYWED ESCAPE: FALLING FOR NAPLES'  
LUXURY AND COASTAL CHARM

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BY CHANELLE HAYES-SESSIONS



Traveling more was something I added to my bucket list for 2025, and getting married was on there too; both came true. When my husband, then fiancé, set our wedding date, the first thing we started dreaming about was where we'd go for our honeymoon. We tossed around ideas — Disneyland for childlike wonder, New York for its city lights and Cancun for its beaches — but Naples, Florida, quietly stole our hearts. When I was offered the opportunity to visit, I couldn't pass it up. The best part was that my husband would be by my side, and Naples would become the backdrop to the beginning of our life together.

We decided on late July for the trip, making it our honeymoon getaway. Experiencing a new city as newlyweds felt special and symbolic of everything ahead. Honestly, I didn't know much about Naples before we went. A quick search described it as a charming city with upscale shopping, world-class dining and a slower pace, exactly the kind of destination we didn't know we needed.

For our stay, we split our time between two of Naples' standout properties: LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort for a beachfront escape and the chic Inn on Fifth, nestled in downtown Naples. Both, part of the Noble House Hotels & Resorts collection, promised the best of both worlds: sun-soaked relaxation by the Gulf of Mexico and vibrant city-side charm.

### Exploring Naples: Local Insights and Hidden Gems

After an early morning flight from Las Vegas with a layover in Atlanta, on Thursday, July 31, we landed at Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers around noon. Our friendly driver greeted us and shared some insight into the area and what makes Naples so special.

He explained the region's proximity to other Florida destinations: roughly an hour and 45 minutes from Miami,



Above: Photo of LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort exterior courtesy of LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort

a little more than three hours and 30 minutes to Orlando, about two hours and 45 minutes to Tampa, and around three hours to St. Petersburg. "Naples is kind of in the center of all of it," he said, noting how much calmer it is compared with the busier nearby cities.

Having lived here since 2010, he shared that the slower pace and peaceful surroundings are a welcome

change for anyone coming from a fast-paced city. "The water is calmer, people are calmer, and it just gives you a real sense of peace of mind," he said.

He also suggested a few notable things to do near LaPlaya, including the beach and The Mercato, a destination known for its blend of shopping, dining and entertainment, and reminded us to stay hydrated during midday strolls.



Above: Photo of BALEEN patio courtesy of LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort

## From Gulf Tower Comfort to Waterfront Dining at BALEEN

As our driver turned onto Gulf Shore Drive, we were immediately surrounded by elegant homes and lush landscaping. When we arrived at LaPlaya, attendants were ready to grab our bags and guide us to the check-in area. The lobby is on the smaller side but felt bright, airy and welcoming, with a tropical vibe.

LaPlaya is home to 189 guest rooms and suites across three distinct areas of the property, with accommodations ranging from 450 to 950 square feet. Checking in was quick and easy, and soon we were heading up to our room in the Gulf Tower, which had a private balcony with an incredible view of the Gulf of Mexico, a comfortable sitting area, a dining space perfect for the two of us, a king-size bed and a spa-like bathroom, as well as close access to the nearby South Beach.

The Bay Tower, on the other hand, overlooks Vanderbilt Bay and features accommodations ranging from junior suites to spacious king suites, many with living areas, sleeper sofas, balconies and coastal-inspired decor, with close proximity to North Beach.

For those who want to be closest to the sand at Vanderbilt Beach, LaPlaya's Beach House rooms are just steps from the shoreline. Some include private fire pits, while others overlook the resort's lush gardens and tiered pools. Details like walk-in showers, upgraded patio furniture and fully stocked refreshment centers make the rooms throughout the property feel both modern and luxurious. The Beach House area also houses LaPlaya's full-service fitness center, SpaTerre and Boutique Aqua.

After settling into our room, we slipped out onto the balcony with a charcuterie platter of fine meats and cheeses. Below us, the resort grounds unfolded like a private garden, and beyond, the Gulf of Mexico shimmered in the late afternoon light. Sitting side by side, we



clinked glasses and let the salty breeze wash over us. It wasn't just a view; it was a reminder that our horizon was wide open, waiting to be discovered together.

That evening, we dined at BALEEN, the resort's signature waterfront restaurant. With tables overlooking the beach and a menu designed for indulgence, it was the perfect spot for our first night in Naples. My lobster bucatini was decadent; his filet mignon was perfectly tender.

We shared sides of crispy Brussels sprouts with grain mustard, fresh herbs and pomegranate seeds, along with a generous helping of truffle fries. The night

*Above: BALEEN exterior (top) and BALEEN beachfront photos courtesy of LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort*

was crowned when our server surprised us with a rich chocolate mousse cake. Afterward, we strolled along the beach, the first of many sunsets we'd greet as husband and wife.

## Exploring The Mercato and LaPlaya's Beachside Bliss

The next day, we took some time to rest before heading to The Mercato, a recommendation from our driver. With wide walkways lined with shops, restaurants and cafés, it had a

*Right: Truluck's exterior (top) and interior photos courtesy of Inn on Fifth*

charming, leisurely vibe that reminded me of Town Square Las Vegas, just south of the Strip.

After a short stroll, we stopped at Tap 42 Craft Kitchen & Bar for a casual lunch. The atmosphere was relaxed and welcoming, and the menu offered a mix of elevated American classics that made for a satisfying midday break.

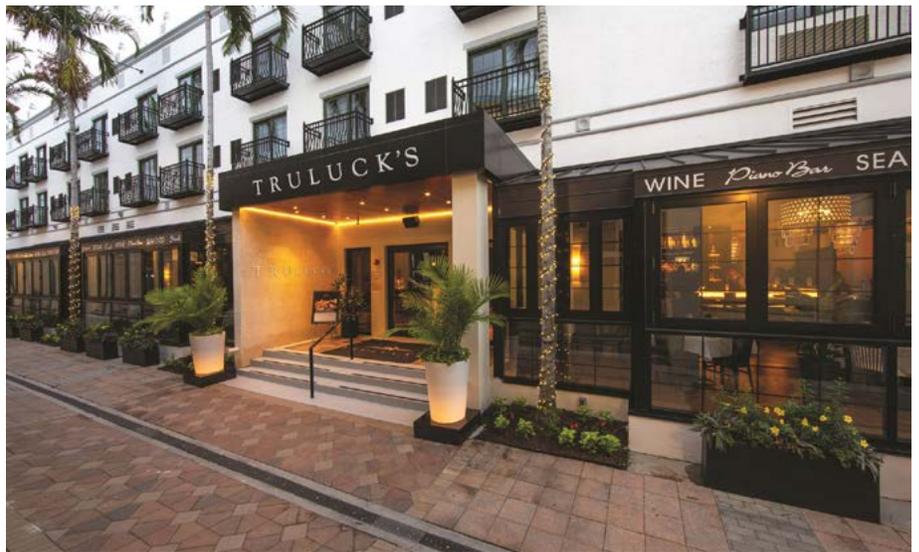
We spent a few hours wandering before heading back to LaPlaya to relax on the beach. The sand was soft and warm under our feet, and the gentle waves rolled in with a soothing rhythm. The water was a clear, inviting turquoise, stretching out as far as we could see, perfect for sinking into the moment and just being together.

Beyond the shoreline, the resort offers multiple pools with private cabanas, each featuring HDTVs, chaise lounges, stocked refrigerators and fresh fruit platters. Later, we enjoyed light fare and handcrafted cocktails at Tiki Bar & Grill before retreating to Elements Bar, a sleek indoor space adjacent to BALEEN.

### **From LaPlaya's Shores to Fifth Avenue's Charm**

The next morning, before checking out, we returned to BALEEN for brunch. We tried the Del Sol, a twist on an all-American breakfast, and a build-your-own omelet with ham, mushrooms and onions. Afterward, we traveled about 20 minutes to downtown Naples and checked in at the Forbes-rated Inn on Fifth. The atmosphere was different from LaPlaya's beachside setting but equally captivating. Nestled among high-end shops, eclectic galleries and acclaimed restaurants, the Inn on Fifth felt like a secluded boutique escape in the heart of the city.

The hotel has 87 deluxe rooms and suites, but we were upgraded to one of the 32 luxury club-level suites located across the street from the main building.



It was beyond anything we expected. The 550-square-foot suite featured stylish decor, an expansive marble bathroom, a plush king-size bed, a spacious living room and dining area, and a private balcony. The overall look and feel reminded me of the hotel rooms at The Venetian and The Palazzo in Las Vegas, just with the bonus of a balcony.

Other amenities included access to a private rooftop with a hot tub and a concierge lounge that served hors d'oeuvres, cocktails and desserts nightly, as well as a continental breakfast every morning, exclusive to club-level guests. We first hit the rooftop pool within the main hotel, where we were served a welcome cocktail at the bar. The space

had a relaxed vibe with lounge chairs, umbrellas, a lush garden and even a fire pit. Within the main hotel, there's also a spa and a fitness center.

That evening, we walked to Truluck's, located just across from the main hotel. The room glowed with dim light, rose petals were scattered across our table, and live piano notes drifted through the air as though Naples itself wanted to serenade us. Over filet mignon and Parmesan mashed potatoes, we toasted to our marriage, savoring not just the flavors but the moment. When the staff surprised us with a flaming baked Alaska, its sparks reflected in my husband's eyes, and I realized this wasn't just dinner. It was Naples raising a glass to our love story.



Above: Inn on Fifth exterior; and right: Inn on Fifth club-level rooftop photos courtesy of Inn on Fifth

## A Honeymoon to Remember

Our four days in Naples showed us that the trip was more than just a honeymoon. It gave us moments wrapped in sunsets, laughter and quiet time together. From mornings on the beach to evenings wandering downtown, every moment reminded us that love grows strongest where beauty and calm come together.

When our plane lifted into the sky, we knew this wouldn't be goodbye. Naples had become our place, a spot we hope to return to year after year, a place to keep falling in love all over again.

For more information about both properties, visit [laplayaresort.com](http://laplayaresort.com) and [innonfifth.com](http://innonfifth.com).





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## TRUE BEGINNINGS: VERA JACKSON MOORE BUILDS SECOND CHANCES IN LAS VEGAS

By Brian G. Thornton

Las Vegas has long been a city of dazzling lights, towering resorts and a rhythm that draws the world to its famous Strip. But beyond the neon and spectacle lies another story — one of resilience, community and second chances. It is here, in the quieter neighborhoods of the Historic Westside, that Vera Jackson Moore is rewriting what it means to begin again.

A Black woman, mother of four and grandmother of three, Moore's life has carried her from San Francisco to Virginia and ultimately to Nevada. Along the way, she has endured challenges that might have silenced others — including incarceration — yet she has transformed that lived experience into a mission of advocacy and hope. In 2013, she founded True Beginnings, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting justice-involved women and their families.

Through housing initiatives, trauma recovery, job readiness and leadership development, Moore and her team are helping women reclaim their place in society with dignity. Their work is as much about immediate care as it is about long-term transformation. From securing safe shelter for homeless mothers



*Above: In the quieter neighborhoods of Henderson, Vera Jackson Moore is rewriting what it means to begin again*

*Right: At True Beginnings, women are met with sisterhood — not just a program*

and children to creating pathways toward careers and self-sufficiency, True Beginnings stands as both a lifeline and a launchpad.

Her vision extends further still: Moore dreams of a warehouse space that doubles as a training hub and furniture workshop, where refurbished pieces become symbols of renewal and women learn skills that reshape their futures. In her words and her work, reupholstery is not just about fabric and wood — it is about restoring hope.

Moore's story is aligned with *Chic Compass'* ongoing mission: to reveal the soul of Las Vegas beyond its bright lights, to celebrate those who bind our community together and to highlight voices that remind us that reinvention is at the heart of this city.

She knows what it means to begin again. Thirteen years ago, she stood at a crossroads most would not survive. A history of incarceration, homelessness, substance misuse and domestic violence weighed heavily on her — until one call from her daughter shifted everything. Her daughter, a new mother, admitted she was homeless and collecting cans to eat.

"On Aug. 23, 2012, I took one last pull from my pipe, crushed it, flushed it and opened my front door. With \$174 and \$562 in food stamps, I moved my family so my daughter could finish college and my granddaughter wouldn't inherit my curse. That was my true beginning."

Moore said, "Why did I do it? To build a legacy. I didn't want to leave this earth as a drug addict who abandoned my children. Death has always lingered in my thoughts, but I've been spared many times. In treatment, I learned something hard about myself: I had been a practicing narcissist. I love-bombed people, gaslit them and felt entitled. I wanted to change."

From that leap of faith, Moore built a



new life in Virginia. She helped young men find jobs, supported neighbors in need and became part of a powerful initiative that was recognized by the governor of Virginia for helping over 25,000 returning citizens regain their right to vote. By 2019, she had carried her calling westward, establishing True Beginnings in Las Vegas, determined to create a legacy of dignity and renewal for women whose struggles mirrored her own.

### **The Challenges of Reentry**

When women first arrive at True Beginnings, they often expect another system of rules and restrictions. Instead, they find warmth, dignity and sisterhood. Food without obligation, furniture without stigma and interviews that ask about readiness rather than eligibility — every detail is designed to signal care.

"At True Beginnings, women are met with sisterhood — not just a program," Moore said.

This foundation matters because women leaving incarceration often feel ostracized long before prison itself: rejected, traumatized and excluded from jobs and homes. By opening doors first, True Beginnings reverses rejection into welcome. Stable housing provides safety; healing work restores self-trust. Together, they create the ground on which women can rebuild.

"You cannot become a safe and whole member of the community until you are

safe within yourself — and that only happens when someone first chooses to be a safe haven for you," Moore explained.

### **A Leader Forged by Experience**

Moore's leadership is rooted in lessons both painful and profound. Her father, a Black Panther, was murdered when she was nine. Her mother, one of San Francisco's first Black women police officers, raised her with strict rules and constant reminders that every move would be scrutinized.

"My lived experience has given me grit, empathy and vision," she said. "It has taught me to lead not from authority, but from example."

Through struggles with racism, housing discrimination and job loss, Moore learned resilience. She parented differently from her mother, giving her children a voice and teaching them to hustle with integrity. Those lessons shaped her view of leadership: compassionate, humble and grounded in service.

"My purpose revealed itself in Virginia. Some young men were dealing drugs behind my house, and I didn't feel safe letting my granddaughter outside," Moore said. "I asked them to leave; they said they couldn't because no one would hire people with felonies and they had to get their money. I didn't accept that. I made a deal: if I found them jobs, they'd stop. I found jobs for all of



*Left: When we build together, no one gets left behind*

them, housing for one, and when he came to my door in tears, my husband told me: 'Get an office. There will be more.' And he was right — the work began. That was when I knew I was going to be a big fish in a little pond. My deepest desire is to create something bigger than myself, something worth every bit of sweat and something I could redirect my pain into while I heal from past pains."

### **Las Vegas: A Complex Home**

Las Vegas, Moore discovered, is a city of contradictions. On the surface, neighbors are polite and welcoming. Underneath, inequities persist: segregation in housing, inequitable schools and systemic barriers that still define opportunity.

"True Beginnings has a place in Las Vegas — not because people want it, but because it's needed, whether they know it or not," she insisted.

The Strip's dazzling lights may mask the city's deeper struggles, but Moore remains resolute. Her mission is not dependent on popularity; it is rooted in obedience to her calling.

### **Family as Anchor**

At the heart of Moore's philosophy is family. Without loved ones to fight for, many women falter. Her own children's acceptance gave her the determination to change, and she has seen the same in others — mothers reunited with daughters, families mended through patience and perseverance.

"Our children are our legacy, our family is our anchor, and both are essential to recovery," she said.

For women without family ties, True Beginnings becomes a chosen family, offering sisterhood and stability.



## Systemic Change

Though Moore emphasizes personal responsibility, she is unflinching about Nevada's urgent needs: higher wages, affordable housing, equitable education funding and probation practices that heal rather than punish.

"If Nevada really wanted reform, it would start with wages, housing and schools — the fundamentals every family needs to thrive," she said.

Her advocacy often resists conventional definitions of "reform." Rather than appealing institutions, she chooses to stand firmly with the people.

## Measuring Success

The proof of True Beginnings lies in its people. A mother once estranged from her daughter rebuilt trust and now works as a case manager. A woman determined to overcome addiction now leads community outreach and advocacy. A man who once lived in his car earned two degrees and today owns both a logistics company and an apartment building, housing others returning from incarceration. She went on to author "Taking Off My Old Coat," a powerful novel chronicling her journey through incarceration, and later created the B.A.S.I.C.S. curriculum — an innovative program ultimately published as "The Ex-Offender Toolkit."



"At the end of the day, no one person is bigger than the team and no team is bigger than the mission," Moore said.

With over a 65% success rate in reducing recidivism, True Beginnings demonstrates that cycles can be broken.

## The Next Five Years

Looking ahead, Moore envisions Amandla Village — a "doors open" initiative to reunite families, provide housing for women and children, and create a community space where healing and opportunity coexist.

"When we build together, no one gets left behind," she said. "We are working to acquire a warehouse that will employ up to 200 formerly incarcerated people in the next five years. More than jobs, it will be a hub for training, work ethic and community collaboration, uniting organizations, Amandla Village housing and INS employment services to build a true bridge to transformation."

Her call to the community is clear: invest, employ, mentor and show up. True Beginnings cannot thrive in isolation; it is a village effort.

## Defining a True Beginning

Ultimately, a "true beginning" looks different for every woman. For some, it's a new job or safe housing. For others, it's a quiet pride in walking taller, loving themselves and rejecting old cycles.

"A true beginning is the courage to love yourself permanently — everything else flows from that," Moore said.

The organization's logo — a circle opening into a road — reflects that philosophy. It isn't about one definition of success but about charting your own.

*For further information to support True Beginnings in Las Vegas, visit [truebeginningstv.org](http://truebeginningstv.org).*

*Left: Vera Jackson Moore*



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# grace

## VEGAS FASHION WEEK DEBUTS NOV. 12-16 STYLE WITH VISION AND ORIGINAL DESIGNS WILL BE CELEBRATED

By Debbie Hall / Photography by Ben Sahagun Photography

This fall, the fashion world will converge in Las Vegas for the inaugural Vegas Fashion Week, scheduled from Nov. 12-16. This exciting event will highlight fashion as a powerful force in culture, creativity and commerce through a week filled with runway shows, citywide activations and immersive experiences.

Presented by the Las Vegas Fashion Council, Vegas Fashion Week will feature:

- Fashion shows and presentations
- Educational talks
- In-store activations, trunk shows and VIP shopping experiences
- Community engagement and entertainment

"We really felt that 2025 was the perfect opportunity to launch Vegas Fashion Week, and this time of year is the perfect time to host our inaugural event. We've had a vision to launch this series of events for many years, and it has been part of the vision of the fashion council since day one," Carrie Carter Cooper, founder and executive director of the Las Vegas Fashion Council and founder of Vegas Fashion Week, explained. "The city is ready for Vegas Fashion Week with the growth and evolution of our city, with entertainment, sports teams, Formula 1, the Sphere and more."



Along with local, emerging and established designers and international style leaders, a designer who has competed on "Project Runway" will also be part of the event. The week will engage residents, visitors, and industry professionals in the celebration of fashion, beauty, and innovation. A variety of locations and activations are happening citywide so everyone can engage throughout the city.

"We're proud to present a diverse range of talent from students and emerging designers to established names and luxury brands. Our runway will also showcase an inclusive selection of models representing all ages, ethnicities, and sizes. It's an honor to highlight the incredible talent within our city and contribute to the growth of our fashion community," Carter Cooper said.

Another goal of the event is to encourage tourism to Las Vegas. "We're in need of a little extra boost these days, so we will present activations including fashion shows, presentations, entertainment and educational presentations."

Kickoff events and activations will begin at The Shops at Crystals on Nov. 13.

Presentations will be at Fashion Show Las Vegas on Nov. 14 and will primarily focus on students, local designers, and emerging designers who don't have full collections yet in this stage of their journey.

"We're providing them with a powerful platform that's highly public facing. Vegas Fashion Week is designed to be a consumer-focused presentation, bringing fashion directly to the community," Carter Cooper added.

Educational presentations, which will be free to the public, are being finalized (check out the website for updated details). They will focus on students, local designers and anyone interested in the fashion industry.

The evening presentation on Nov. 15 at Worre Studios ([worrestudios.com](http://worrestudios.com)) will feature a variety of designers who



have full collections and may be known brands. The featured designer from "Project Runway" will also be in attendance. The state-of-the-art studio features incredible projection screens and immersive experiences.

The final event will take place at Peacock Alley at the Waldorf Astoria in its exquisite tearoom as an informal modeling presentation on Nov. 16 featuring world-renowned designer Anne Fontaine.

"We're thrilled to have TAO Group Hospitality as our nightlife partner, presenting exclusive after-parties from Nov. 13–15 and signature cocktails curated just for Vegas Fashion Week. Throughout the week, we've created experiences designed to appeal to every audience. This inaugural event is an exciting moment for our city, celebrating

creativity across the fashion industry while spotlighting the incredible talent that makes Las Vegas shine," Carter Cooper said.

"Vegas Fashion Week is more than a celebration of style — it's a statement about the power of fashion to shape culture, drive innovation and build community. As the Las Vegas Fashion Council brings this vision to life, we are proud to spotlight the incredible talent that defines our city and to welcome the world to experience Las Vegas as a global fashion capital."

*Mark your calendars for Nov. 12-16 and visit [vegASFashionWeek.com](http://vegASFashionWeek.com) for tickets and more details. Follow on Facebook @LasVegasFashionCouncil, Instagram @officialvegASFashionWeek and X (formerly Twitter) @LVFC\_NV.*



## Carrie Carter Cooper

Carrie Carter Cooper has lived in Las Vegas since she was 4 years old, which she considers home and identifies as a native of Nevada.

"I was a model myself, and that's certainly my passion and my interest. I was primarily a runway and print model; I did that for many years in Las Vegas. I also lived in Tokyo and Europe and worked for David Copperfield for a couple of years as a dancer and assistant on stage with his touring shows and Vegas residencies. So, I definitely have an extensive background in fashion with modeling, production and event planning.

"In 1997, I started my company Best Agency, a model and talent agency, and event planning production. We create entertainment concepts for hotels, casinos and shopping centers and produce events. We are very proud of our full wardrobe, decor and prop departments, as well as the wide range of talent and services that we provide."

Carter Cooper, being a native of Nevada with Las Vegas as her home, is very philanthropically involved in the community. She thought it would be a beautiful tie-in to take her background and history in the fashion industry, event planning and production world, along with her philanthropic interest in giving back to her community.

"I launched the Las Vegas Fashion Council in 2012. We are a nonprofit focused on raising funds for scholarships for students to further pursue their education in fashion. We have awarded 41 scholarships to date. We do so in partnership with the Public Education Foundation, which is our liaison between our organization and local high schools with fashion programs. It's been a beautiful partnership. In addition to that, we create platforms and annual signature events that we share throughout the year, such as the Little Black Dress Design Competition, Eco Couture and artLIVE. Some of our educational presentations and the Fashion Focus



Forum bring forth experts in the fashion industry, including established designers, hair and makeup professionals, photographers and more."

The Las Vegas Fashion Council provides these platforms for students to take what they're learning in the classroom and bring it into real-life situations. Local designers are provided opportunities to be seen, share who they are and what they're creating, giving them exposure for people to hopefully purchase their items and further encourage them along their journey in the fashion industry.

"We make it a priority to actively engage and seek out meaningful

*Above: Photo of Carrie Carter Cooper courtesy of Jerry Metellus Photography, Bo Brinkman and Iryna Pume*

collaborations with organizations like MAGIC and other major conventions. This summer, we were honored to partner with MAGIC to showcase local and emerging designers, providing them with a powerful platform to present their work to an international audience. The talent and creativity we witnessed reaffirmed just how vibrant and innovative our city truly is."

*For more information on the Las Vegas Fashion Council, visit [lasvegashioncouncil.com](http://lasvegashioncouncil.com).*

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# charity

## ASSISTING LIVES IN LAS VEGAS WILL CELEBRATE 50 YEARS OF SERVING

By Debbie Hall / Photography courtesy of Assisting Lives in Las Vegas

Assisting Lives in Las Vegas (ALLV), previously known as Assistance League of Las Vegas, is a volunteer-driven nonprofit organization with 501(c)(3) status. Since its founding in 1976, the organization has enriched the lives of children and adults in need through hands-on programs, services and philanthropic initiatives. Its volunteers collectively contribute more than 65,000 hours each year to support at-risk children and families in the Las Vegas community.

Sue Trock is the current president and has been a member for 16 years in California and three years in Nevada. Her role is to ensure the organization continues its mission of serving students, children and families. She credits volunteers for their dedication and the dynamic work they do in each program.

Current programs include:

### **AL's Closet: Meeting Immediate Clothing Needs in At-Risk Schools**

ALLV provides emergency clothing to low-income, at-risk schools through AL's Closet. Partnering with the Clark County School District's (CCSD) School-Community Partnership Program, they support approximately 83 schools. Children's clothing is not sold in the ALLV Thrift Shop, but gently used donations



*Above from left: Judith Harriman, Mary Laub and Sue Trock, 2025 president of Assisting Lives in Las Vegas, inside Our School Boutique*

are bagged and delivered directly to the schools.

### **Desert Sage Auxiliary**

Desert Sage supports local hospitals and clinics through the Angel's Assistance Program, approved in 2002 at University Medical Center, and later expanded to additional hospitals and pediatric clinics.

### **UNLV HOPE Scholars Program**

This partnership with CCSD, Nevada

Partnership for Homeless Youth, Desert Sage Auxiliary and UNLV assists graduating seniors who qualify as unaccompanied homeless youth. The program provides year-round housing, academic guidance and financial support for students attending UNLV.

### **Hope High Program**

This initiative supports at-risk youth struggling with basic needs, helping to improve their life trajectory with community-based assistance.



*Above: Assisting Lives in Las Vegas member volunteers Darla Gustaitis and Theresa Tillman inside the nonprofit's award-winning thrift shop*

*Right: Assisting Lives in Las Vegas member volunteer Patti Kennedy at Our School Boutique*

**Layettes Program**

ALLV provides infant t-shirts, bodysuits, bibs, booties and caps to agencies in Clark County, including the Baby Steps prenatal program, which offers health-care and classes for new mothers.

**Operation Bear Hug**

Since 1988, ALLV has provided teddy bears to children and adults in crisis throughout the community.

**Our School Boutique: Dressing Students in Need in Clark County Schools (Pre-K-8)**

Students from CCSD Title I-designated elementary and middle schools are referred to the boutique by their school counselors or administrators. Since 1978, students have been able to select a week's worth of brand-new clothing, shoes and essential hygiene items. Feedback shows that students' behavior



and attendance improve when they participate.

ALLV collaborates with vendors to ensure all clothing and shoes are new. Students' favorite colors and sizes are noted in advance, and items are tried on to confirm a good fit.

"The success stories are the members who were helped when they were students. They saw what an impact it had on their lives. How simple it was, going shopping for the first time for clothing for school that wasn't used or ill-fitting. They want to return that to the community," said Carole Greene, Our School Boutique chair.



*Above: Assisting Lives in Las Vegas thrift shop chair Joanie McCarty*

### Perfect Fit

Funded by the Volunteers Auxiliary, this program provides plus-size clothing for teens who shop at Our School Boutique.

### Scholarships

ALLV has partnered with the College of Southern Nevada (CSN) Foundation to offer scholarships for Clark County residents pursuing higher education at CSN.

### The Kids on the Block

Puppeteers perform skits for CCSD students in first through third grades to address social issues and disabilities, helping children understand others' experiences. Topics include ADHD, bullying, divorce and learning disabilities.

### Assisting Lives in Las Vegas Thrift Shop

The thrift shop offers men's and women's apparel and shoes (excluding children's items), books, housewares, linens, home decor, seasonal items, antiques, collectibles and jewelry. Additional donations may include tools, sporting goods and small furniture items. Blankets, sheets

and towels that are soiled are donated to animal welfare organizations.

The Top Drawer section features designer clothing and accessories at reasonable prices, including St. John Knits, Michael Kors, Donna Karan and Ugg boots. Volunteers inspect items to ensure they are clean and free of damage.

"The impact is that people come here for bargains for themselves. All the money we raise goes back into helping somebody else in the community, and it's a nice way of giving back," said Joanie McCarty, thrift shop chair. "The thrift shop is amazing. We keep everything in mint condition. We only put seasonals out during that season, like Christmas during Christmas, Easter during Easter and other seasons."

McCarty joined the organization 17 years ago at her mother-in-law's suggestion. Her mother-in-law was also a member.

"Every dollar we raise stays in the Las Vegas community, and the donation goes back to helping somebody in need. It's a wonderful circle, with the donations, the funds, and what we return to the community. The number of

people who come into our thrift shop has increased because of some of the situations, and we've not seen a downward turn in donations at all," McCarty added.

### The (Almost) 50-Year History Backstory

"The National Assistance League contacted three ladies, Mary Laub, Sarah Stelter and Bonnie Bryan, about developing an organization in Las Vegas. They put together a steering committee and sent an invitation list to about 100 people to hear about this organization, where we could research our community and find out where there were needs that were not being met," explained Judith Harriman, one of the founders of the organization in 1976, and became the nonprofit's third president at age 33.

"Once we formed it, we found out how many places there were where people were very much in need. We wanted to focus on children because they are sometimes the forgotten ones and need an advocate. One of the things we discovered was that there were children who weren't attending school because

*Right: Assisting Lives in Las Vegas member volunteer Terry Varcalle at Our School Boutique*

*Right below: Assisting Lives in Las Vegas member volunteer Lisa Hyde at Our School Boutique*

they lacked clothing to wear. We found this out from the school district because attendance officers at that time would visit homes, and this was one of the reasons. We realized there was a real, definite need in this community, so we put together a program for clothing the students, which was one of our first programs."

ALLV also discovered that many students didn't have books at home. The organization created a reading program that allowed students to earn books, bookmarks, bookplates and other fun items. For those students who were too young to read yet, Harriman was one of the readers.

"I would take Fuzzy Wuzzy books so they would become engaged and get them interested in reading. That's what we wanted to promote and then give them a book to take home with them," Harriman said.

The original member volunteers met in the auditorium of Southwest Gas Corp. on Spring Mountain Road. "The reason we were able to meet there is because Mary [Laub] was our first president and she talked Bill, her husband, into allowing us to have our monthly meetings there free of charge for over 20 years. He made so many resources available to us. I also speak highly of him because I worked for him before I met Mary," Harriman stated.

Harriman served on the committee that worked to secure its present chapter facility, located at 6446 W. Charleston Blvd., which took the nonprofit to a new level. In the early years, its projects were located across the valley, including Marion Cahlan Elementary School, Jim Bridger Middle School and J.D. Smith Elementary School, as the school district provided the locations. At one point, the school district built a facility



on St. Louis Avenue and offered ALLV a room for its clothing program, complete with a washer and dryer.

"In 1991, we rented a store in the strip mall, which we called the Service

Center, at the corner of Jones and Charleston boulevards, and we called in all the files from the previous 15 years. We had three file cabinets, and we still have them, by the way, and even got a copy machine," Harriman said.

ALLV began searching for land in the early 1990s and discovered a parcel of undeveloped land at the corner of Shadow Lane and Alta Drive. Another buyer, however, outbid them. Their real estate broker mentioned a piece of property on Charleston Boulevard that was not for sale but thought it would be ideal for ALLV.

"The owner was a friend of many of us, and his wife had been a member of our organization. So he knew about us. He really didn't want to sell, but we explained our plans to him, and then he sold it to us. Once we acquired the land, we began approaching various groups about potentially securing a grant. One of the first grants we looked into was the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation. Judy Goolsby's husband, John, was the head of the Howard Hughes Corp. and was on the board of trustees of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation.

"We submitted the grant request, and we were awarded a grant in June 1996. They would give us \$3.2 million to build this building, but we had to raise \$1.67 million in a very short period of time to pay off the land, create an endowment fund for the maintenance of the building and cover on-site improvements, including paving and landscaping, which were not included in the grant. I have fond memories of being on the capital campaign cabinet, raising money at the same time that I was helping facilitate the design, contracting and construction of the building because I was on the chapter facility committee, as well," Harriman said.

## 50th Anniversary Celebrations

ALLV will mark its 50th anniversary in 2026 with two celebrations. The first will be Feb. 26, marking 50 years to the day since the founders signed the resolution to establish the organization in Las Vegas.

"We're going to have an open house where we will be inviting the community



to come to our chapter facility and learn more about us, give them a tour, and offer some light refreshments," Trock said.

ALLV will also hold a member-only celebration on April 25 to recognize the outstanding work of all its member volunteers, as without their spirit and enthusiasm, none of this would be possible.

*Above: Assisting Lives in Las Vegas member volunteer Judy Freeman at Our School Boutique*

*The chapter facility is located at 6446 W. Charleston Blvd. For more information, visit [allv.org](http://allv.org).*

## 2026 Authors Luncheon

The Authors Luncheon will be held March 21 at 6446 W. Charleston Blvd., featuring local authors Amanda Skenandore, Judi Moreo, Paul Fronczak and former Nevada Gov. and U.S. Sen. Richard Bryan. The event will include a silent auction, facility tours and a boutique with handmade and thrifted items.

The program will begin at 10 a.m., followed by a luncheon where attendees can meet the authors, hear about their work and purchase signed copies of their books.

Tickets are \$100 per person through Feb. 15 at [allv.org](http://allv.org) (plus credit card processing fees). After that date, tickets are \$120. Sponsorships are also available. Proceeds support ALLV's philanthropic programs serving thousands in the Las Vegas community.

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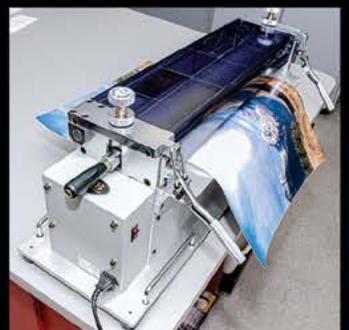
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# A LOOK BACK AT THE 2025 VENICE FILM FESTIVAL

By Janet Susan R. Nepales

In our 16th year of attending the Venice Film Festival, the magic and glamour still excite us as much as they did the first time.

Now in its 82nd year, the festival, held in Lido, Venice, Italy, continues to attract Hollywood A-listers and celebrities either as part of the competition or as guests.

The whirlwind of screenings, premieres, red carpets and after-parties has made this festival one of the most sought-after and well-attended international events.

George Clooney and Amal Clooney, hand in hand on the red carpet, were among the first to arrive for George's world premiere of his comedy-drama "Jay Kelly," which also stars Adam Sandler, Laura Dern and Billy Crudup. Emma Stone and her "Bugonia" co-stars Jesse Plemons and Aidan Delbis joined hands with director Yorgos Lanthimos on day two of the festival as they premiered their black comedy thriller for the Sala Grande audience.

People were shocked and bewildered when the Alexander Payne-led jury chose Jim Jarmusch's comedy-drama anthology "Father Mother Sister Brother," starring Cate Blanchett and Adam Driver, which ran away with the Golden Lion top award. The crowd and press favorite, "The Voice of Hind Rajab," ended up with the runner-up Silver Lion.

The South Korean satirical black comedy thriller by Park Chan-wook, "No Other Choice," another Venice favorite, did not win any awards.



*Above: The author with her colleagues from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association at the "Frankenstein" pre-premiere party in Venice*

At a press conference, jury president Payne said "No Other Choice" unfortunately did not even make it to the final eight (out of 21 films). "We loved many films," he said. "That's the unfair thing of being at a festival, is having to say this is better than that. It's not."

Other jury members included Brazilian actress and writer Fernanda Torres, Italian director Maura Delpero, Romanian director and producer Cristian Mungiu, Iranian filmmaker and producer Mohammad Rasoulof, and Chinese actor and producer Zhao Tao.

Written and directed by Kaouther Ben Hania, the docudrama "The Voice of Hind Rajab" follows the story of the killing of Hind Rajab, a 6-year-old Palestinian girl who lived in the Gaza Strip and was killed with her family in their car by the Israel Defense Forces during the Israeli invasion.

It received the longest standing ovation of the festival, lasting 23 minutes.

Before and during the festival, numerous pro-Palestinian demonstrations were held, demanding an end to the violence



Above: Filmmaker Sofia Coppola with fashion designer Marc Jacobs at the premiere of Coppola's documentary on the designer, "Marc by Sofia" at the 2025 Venice Film Festival

Right: Actors Dwayne Johnson and Emily Blunt at the after-party of their movie "The Smashing Machine"



in Gaza. Controversy arose as activist groups urged the festival to disinvite certain artists, but Alberto Barbera, the Venice Film Festival's artistic director, instead stressed that the Biennale, the organization behind the festival, is a space for dialogue and that the festival would not exclude artists because of their political views. He also expressed sorrow over civilian suffering in Gaza and Palestine.

Amid the political backdrop, the festival also continued to celebrate artistry. Filmmaker Julian Schnabel, known for such films as "At Eternity's Gate," "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" and "Basquiat," was honored with the Cartier Glory to the Filmmaker Award. This year, he brought his star-studded drama "In the Hand of Dante" to the festival. Present were stars Oscar Isaac, Jason Momoa and Louis Canelmi. Other cast members included Gal Gadot, Gerard Butler, Al Pacino, John Malkovich, Martin Scorsese and Franco Nero.

When asked during the press conference for "In the Hand of Dante" about calls to bar certain actors, Schnabel said there was "no reason to boycott artists. I selected those actors for their merits as actors, and they did an extraordinary job in the film and that's about it. I think we should talk about the movie rather than this issue."

Seth Rogen made surprise appearances throughout the festival. We asked him at "The Smashing Machine" after-party if he was planning to do an episode of

the Venice Film Festival for the multi-Emy-nominated show "The Studio."

"That would be nice," Rogen said, adding that this was his first international film festival and part of his "research."

At "The Smashing Machine" after-party, we also spoke with stars Dwayne Johnson, who was enjoying his first Venice Film Festival, and Emily Blunt. The two actors shared that their confrontational scene in the movie was the most challenging of all.



"It was a very emotional scene for both of us," Blunt admitted.

At the press conference for "The Smashing Machine," Blunt was asked if she was surprised that there was actually a woman in the ultra-hyper-masculine wrestling environment where Johnson portrays mixed martial arts fighter Mark Kerr and Blunt portrays his former wife, Dawn Staples.

"I was delighted that there was a woman in the midst of it, because there was a lot going on behind closed doors of what it means to live with a fighter and the all-consuming world that comes with that," Blunt said. "I got to know Dawn well and she was very generous with her story with me, the full weather system of it, the regrets, the eruptions, the hazardous nature of the relationship at times, and the deep, profound love and devotion they had to each other amid an impossible environment."

The film's director Benny Safdie won the best director award at the festival. Other winners included Chinese actress Xin Zhilei, who won best actress for Cai Shangjun's "The Sun Rises on Us All"; Italian actor Toni Servillo, who won best actor for the festival's opening film "La

Grazia"; and Swiss actor Luna Wedler, who won the newcomer Marcello Mastroianni Award for "Silent Friend."

At the "Frankenstein" pre-premiere party, director Guillermo del Toro was besieged by admirers, including Schnabel, who was there for "In the Hand of Dante." Both films star Oscar Isaac, who portrays Victor Frankenstein in "Frankenstein" and Nick Tosches/Dante Alighieri in "In the Hand of Dante."

When we congratulated Isaac for having two films in the festival this year, Schnabel proudly commented, "And he is good in both of them!" He even volunteered to take our photo with his star.

At the premiere of "Frankenstein," which received a 13-minute standing ovation, actor Jacob Elordi, who portrayed the monster, broke down in tears after seeing the warm reception from the Venice audience. Upon exiting the theater, we were pleasantly surprised when Del Toro kissed us on the cheek after we congratulated him.

Also moved and very emotional at the premiere of "The Smashing Machine" was Johnson, who sobbed as his film received a 15-minute standing ovation.



*Above Top: Director Julian Schnabel and actor Oscar Isaac at the premiere of their film "In the Hand of Dante" at the 2025 Venice Film Festival*

*Above: Korean actor Teo Yoo of "Past Lives" served as a jury member for the Golden Globes Impact Documentary Award event*

Another film not to be missed was Kathryn Bigelow's nuclear thriller "A House of Dynamite," which received an 11-minute standing ovation.

This is her first film after an eight-year hiatus. The movie, which stars Idris Elba and Rebecca Ferguson, opens when an unidentified missile is launched at the United States, sparking a race to determine who is responsible and how to respond.

At a press conference for "A House of Dynamite," Bigelow was asked why it took her so long to follow up on her 2017 film "Detroit" and what made her passionate about making this one.

The filmmaker replied, "I think you've kind of answered the question a little bit. It's passion. I have to be passionate about a subject matter for me. I just don't know if I'm really a director or not, but I'm absolutely committed to a subject and a story. Then I feel like I can do anything, but I have to really believe in the material. And this, I felt, was so important to get this conversation out there. Then we can begin to evaluate. This is a global issue, like where we are with nuclear weapons. Of course, hope against hope, maybe we reduce the nuclear stockpile someday. But in the meantime, we are really living in a house of dynamite. And so, my interest was to get that information out there."

From politics to fashion, Sofia Coppola's documentary on fashion icon Marc Jacobs, "Marc by Sofia," was also warmly received in Venice with a standing ovation.

In a press conference, the filmmaker said the 97-minute film was simply a "personal portrait" of a friend. It showed the 12 weeks leading up to the Marc Jacobs Spring 2024 show, with Coppola interviewing the designer about his career milestones and highlights.

"It was really a sincere, small project," Coppola said. "It was really important for me to show Marc as a creative person in his process and I was happy that he felt comfortable around me. I think it's

always important for me to show something genuine, show the person that I love and their real side."

During the festival, Ross McElwee's "Remake" also won the Golden Globes Impact Prize for Documentary, presented by the Artemis Rising Foundation.

Jury members included Helen Hoehne, president of the Golden Globes; Regina K. Scully, founder and CEO of

the Artemis Rising Foundation; actor-musician Jharrel Jerome; actor Teo Yoo; producer and Impact Partners co-founder GERALYN WHITE DREYFOUS; screenwriter Misan Sagay; director Edoardo Ponti; and Danielle Turkov Wilson, founder and CEO of Think-Film Impact Production.

*Below: Janet and Ruben Nepales with actor Oscar Isaac at the "Frankenstein" pre-premiere party*



# IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT MEET THE WOMEN DRIVING CHANGE AT THE FORMULA 1 HEINEKEN LAS VEGAS GRAND PRIX 2025

By Stacey Gualandi / Photography courtesy of F1 Grand Prix of Las Vegas





As the Formula 1 Heineken Las Vegas Grand Prix starts revving its engine for the third annual trip around the Strip, the predominantly male sport has shifted into a new gear.

What makes this high-octane race stand out is the number of women in the driver's seat. In other words, these ladies prefer not to stay in their lane.

"Our time has come in motorsport, and it is fantastic to see the commitment of my peers, colleagues and bosses — a lot of them who are 'Boss Babes,'" said Lori Nelson-Kraft, senior vice president of corporate affairs for the Las Vegas Grand Prix.

Nelson-Kraft is just one of several high-profile female team members on and off the track, under the hood, behind the wheel and in the boardroom of F1 Las Vegas.

"I'd like to think it is coincidental, but I believe leadership starts at the top," she said.

That pole position goes to trailblazer Emily Prazer. As both chief commercial officer of Formula 1 and president and CEO of the Las Vegas Grand Prix, Prazer could easily take a "lap of honor" for helping to create the Las Vegas Strip Circuit and its subsequent success.

"It starts with having someone of influence with a seat at that table and someone who really has done an exceptional job of raising up the profile of women in this organization," Nelson-Kraft said.

In 2023, Nelson-Kraft brought to the Las Vegas Grand Prix three decades of established, trusted relationships and deep knowledge of the intricacies of tourism and community events in the community, especially after her time with the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority.

*Left: Photo of Las Vegas Grand Prix Pit Building exterior by We Fly Aerial Media*

"Emily very much wanted to demonstrate our investment in the local community and just needed someone with a deeper understanding to help connect those dots and bring it all together with a bow on top," Nelson-Kraft said.

Nelson-Kraft oversees communications, government affairs and community engagement but admits she's still getting up to speed on the twists and turns of motorsport.

"Growing up, my father taught me how to drive, and all the years he was in the car with me, he referred to me as Mario Andretti," joked Nelson-Kraft of her lead foot.

"He always said that I had a career in racing, so what I find so ironic about how he always teased me is that, at the end of the day, I got a career in racing."

Las Vegas Grand Prix's vice president of sporting and race operations, Silvia Bellot, also likes to step on the gas.

As a young teenager in Spain, her father would often take her to the racetrack.

"I just absolutely loved the sport. I wanted to come with him after that to all the races," Bellot said. "They didn't let me do much — I was making copies and distributing documents — but for me, that was the most important thing I was doing."

Bellot knew this was the sport for her, but she had to put the brakes on her dream of driving a race car.

"My parents were really supportive, but there was no clear pathway. There were no female role models that I could say, 'Oh, I want to be like her, or if she can do it, I can do it,'" Bellot said. Fortunately, the onetime lack of inclusivity of F1 is in the rearview.

Bellot is now a pioneer of the sport.

She went from teenage track marshal to Spain's youngest female steward at

18. In 2011, she served her first race as a permanent steward in Formula 1 and went on to be the youngest person and first woman to serve as race director for the FIA Formula 2 and Formula 3 Championships in 2020.

Now in her third year at the Las Vegas Grand Prix, Bellot's drive to thrive has landed her dual roles alongside Emily Prazer.

"I've been so lucky," Bellot said, referring to her work on all on-track and sporting-related activities. "I think breaking this glass ceiling was a challenge, but I couldn't think of a better role to take on than race director for F1 Academy."

F1 Academy is the all-female racing series that will train the next era of female racers to ascend to Formula 1.

*Below: A general view of fireworks at the opening ceremony during previews ahead of the F1 Grand Prix of Las Vegas at the Las Vegas Strip Circuit, Nov. 15, 2023 (photo by Clive Mason - Formula 1)*





F1 Grand Prix of Las Vegas - Qualifying (Photo by Clive Mason - Formula 1)



Silvia Bellot at the Las Vegas Grand Prix - Las Vegas Strip Circuit

This is the first year F1 Academy is in Las Vegas — the 2025 title championship will be decided there — and for the first time, there will be a who's who of women-oriented sponsors, something that has never existed before.

F1 Academy driver Nicole Havrda says

she started racing at 12 in go-karts.

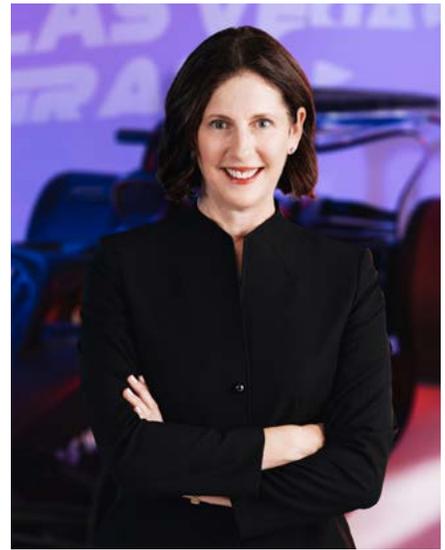
"Growing up for me, there weren't many races for girls, so having this series is super important because everyone sees us — big teams, big brands — it's just trying to get another female to Formula 1, basically."

Typically, Bellot said, "racing is one of the most demanding sports dominated by men, with women mostly on the hospitality side." Now, F1 is one of the few sports where men and women compete against each other.

Bellot thinks greater attention to detail and the ability to go the extra mile are key skills helping women's standings in the sport.

"[My male colleagues] are amazing, and they're great with technical skills, and 100% we need them," she said. "But even in the race operation department, the majority of colleagues are women, which is also very strange."

Nelson-Kraft added, "The fast growth of the sport and its focus on the United States and here in North America has carved out an opportunity that, despite who you are, a lot of the best people are plucked because they're just good at their positions. If it's coincidentally a woman, make no mistake about it, they earned it."



Both ladies agree that the Netflix series' "Drive to Survive" and "F1: The Academy" and the feature film "F1" starring Brad Pitt are driving the sport's popularity. Right now, approximately 42% of fans are women.

Bellot added that 26% of the newly selected marshals this year are women — a 15% increase compared with last year.

"So, imagine how much this is changing the sport and shaping the careers of future engineers, mechanics, drivers, etc.," Bellot said.

With this strength in female numbers, the Las Vegas team isn't spinning its wheels. Nelson-Kraft says community outreach is her number one priority.

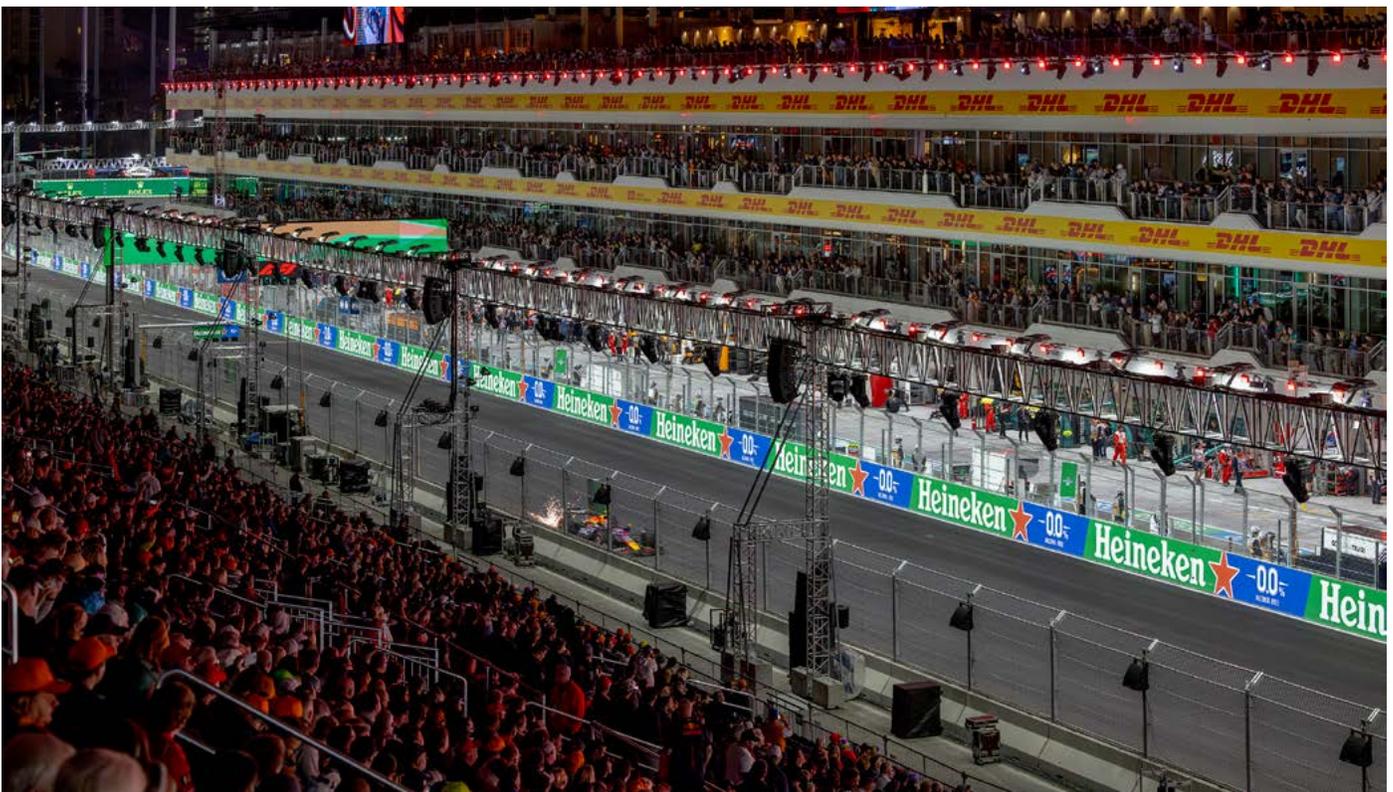
"We struck up a partnership with the Girl Scouts, and it will be the first time

*Above: (L-R) Emily Prazer, Silvia Bellot, Lori Nelson-Kraft*

*Below: Photo of F1 Grand Prix of Las Vegas at Las Vegas Strip Circuit Pit Building Main Grandstand by Christy Radecic*

*Far Right: Photo of F1 Grand Prix of Las Vegas at Las Vegas Strip Circuit Starting Grid by Christy Radecic*

I think an event has done anything like this," Nelson-Kraft said. "That started



with our CEO. She said, "I'd like the Girl Scouts to be at our event."

Young girls will now be selling and sampling their Girl Scout cookies in the Fan Zone and gifting cookies to Paddock Club guests.

"In addition to that, we'll be doing a community activation with all the Girl Scouts who are onsite during the event for those three days, the F1 Academy and the female drivers," Nelson-Kraft said. "This partnership will extend beyond just race week."

Four hundred Clark County School District middle school students with a STEM background will also get exclusive behind-the-scenes access on "Community Day" with none other than seven-time world champion driver Sir Lewis Hamilton.

"So, when I say we have this platform and this real estate to really make a difference, we really do," Nelson-Kraft said.

"I very much believe in this race — to see it sustain and remain an annual event. And for my employer, who has a heart of gold, to keep respecting the fact that our success partially is due to the local community who welcomed them, and the privilege we get to take over those streets and host a spectacular race."

For Bellot, she credits motorsport for putting her on the right track.

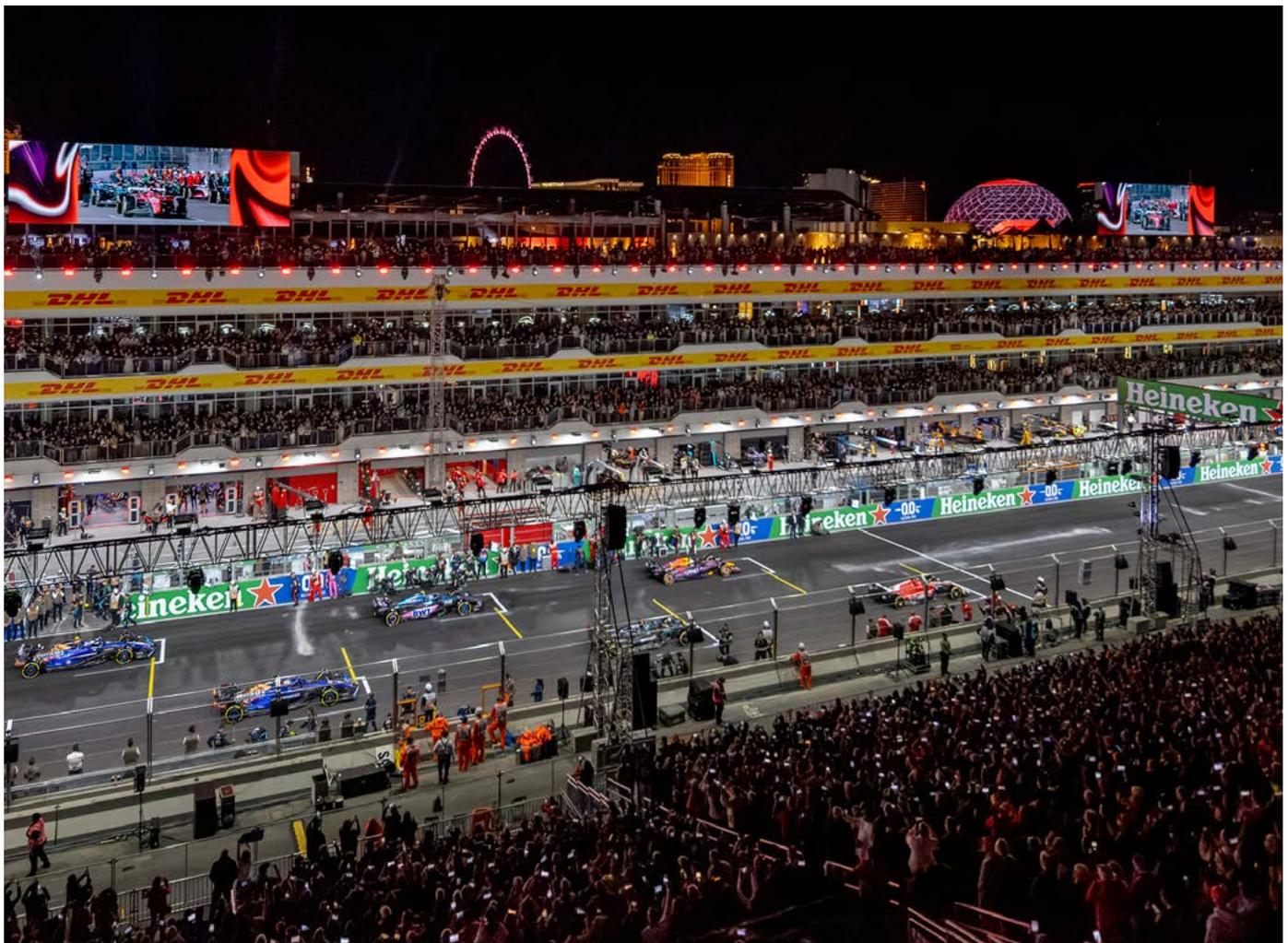
"I was a very shy teenager and then being able to meet new people from different nationalities just completely shaped me as the woman I am today."

While it took 14 years for another female to follow Bellot's lead and achieve race director status, she has succeeded in setting a new course for the next generation.

"I just want one day for this not to be part of the news, that this will just be normal to have women all around Formula 1 and on the leadership level," Bellot said.

Bellot, Prazer, Nelson-Kraft and all of their fellow female team members throughout the Las Vegas Grand Prix remain committed to going the distance, ensuring the sport's continued growth across the country and reinforcing ties to the local community, no matter how long it takes to cross the finish line.

"I just want to give back to the sport because the sport has been really good to me," Bellot added. "I hope I can be here for many, many more years."





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# WELLNESS IN GIVING: LAS VEGAS CHARITIES THAT HEAL BEYOND THE HOLIDAYS

By Erika Luren, RN, BSN, MA, MS, NP, founder of Rolling Wellness Telemedicine

As the holiday season approaches, giving back takes on new meaning in Las Vegas, a city known for its glittering lights and big stages but also home to quiet acts of service that change lives. Three local leaders — former NFL linebacker Morlon Greenwood of the Morlon Greenwood Foundation, Troy Roques of Vegas for Athletes and Kate McLaughlin, executive director of Girls on the Run Las Vegas — have turned their personal journeys into powerful missions. Through athletics, mentorship and wellness-focused programs, they are shaping futures for kids and young women who might otherwise go unseen. Their stories remind us that true holiday giving isn't just about gifts — it's about investing in health, hope, confidence and the next generation.

Innovation is the physical manifestation of thought, garnered through experience and fortified through the passion fueling the work of a touched individual. These three charities were founded on such principles, with each journey unique to its creator — from humble beginnings in Jamaica for Greenwood to a family legacy with Roques and a schoolteacher's mission inspiring executives like McLaughlin.

## **From Gridiron Glory to Guiding Light: The Legacy of Morlon Greenwood**

Greenwood stood among the elite of athletes, kicking around a soccer ball with his bare feet, whirling the Jamaican dust. When he wasn't playing soccer, he was sprinting the track, letting the



*Above: Morlon Greenwood stands with two MVPs from the Morlon Greenwood Foundation's free youth football camp at Cimarron Memorial High School*

humdrum of the wind pass his ears and whisper the future that lay before him. Greenwood's story is one of the American dream — spurred by the ardent encouragement of his father, the guiding love of his mother and a precocious sense of duty to his 12 siblings. His childhood reverie blossomed into a life as an NFL linebacker for the Miami Dolphins, Houston Texans and later a UFL player for the Omaha Nighthawks. Dedication to the game became the catalyst for uplifting his immigrant family, but along the path to reaching his own potential, Greenwood discovered a greater purpose, one rooted in altruism and faith.

In 2015, he founded the Morlon Greenwood Foundation, a charity devoted to offering education and mentorship to disadvantaged youth. The

program instills sportsmanship, leadership, social responsibility and the pursuit of personal potential — values passed down by the most influential man in his life, his father.

"He taught me to focus on my education and to believe in myself. His motto was, 'Do your best at any contest and God will do the rest.' This resonates with me to this day," Greenwood said.

That motto became the force that drove his focus on sports and academics after arriving in New York City at age 11. As a high school sophomore, he caught the eye of Coach Russ Cellan,



who redirected him from wrestling to football — a pivot that earned Morlon a scholarship to Syracuse University. There, he started 48 consecutive games while earning a degree in physical therapy before going on to dominate the NFL for 11 years. Yet, as Morlon often says, "that was only the first half" of his success story.

The second chapter is built on giving back. Since its inception, the Morlon Greenwood Foundation has served thousands of students, offering free symposiums, leadership camps and mentorship opportunities guided by former NFL players, celebrities and community leaders.

"It is very impactful for youth to hear a public figure talk about struggles they've lived through," Greenwood reflected. "We've seen this ignite a spark within them to start their own journey."

Today, the Morlon Greenwood Foundation doesn't just teach kids to

chase goals; it helps them see themselves as leaders, equipped with resilience and vision. The foundation has become a living tribute to the wisdom of Greenwood's late father, carrying forward his belief that education, discipline and faith can transform lives. Through the foundation, Greenwood is proving that true greatness lies not in the tackles made on the field, but in the futures shaped beyond it.

### **Saving Young Lives: Troy Roques and the Mission of Vegas for Athletes**

"For young athletes struck by this silent condition, the survival rate is only 10%, and too often, the first symptom is death," Roques shared.

As executive director of Vegas for Athletes, Roques has turned urgency into action, championing youth screenings for the hidden threat of sudden cardiac arrest (SCA). Since its birth in 2024, Vegas for Athletes has stood

*Above: The next generation of athletes brought passion, smiles and hard work to the field at the Morlon Greenwood Foundation's free youth football camp*

as more than a fitness-focused charity; it has become a guardian of life itself, catching what might have been lost and transforming tragedy into prevention.

Roques spearheaded this initiative in line with his athletic acumen as a former high school football player, grounded in his Marine Corps sense of duty and guided by his family legacy.

"My family was one of the early pioneers of the NIL (name, image, likeness) movement through lobbying with the National College Players Association (NCPA) in 2012 for players' rights," Roques stated.

Thanks to the advocacy of his cousin, Ryan Roques, a former UCLA football player, the movement to secure fair monetary compensation for college athletes,



*Above: Vegas For Athletes volunteers and families gathered for a Las Vegas Aces home game in honor of Jordan Brister, a student-athlete from Amplus Academy who tragically lost his life to sudden cardiac arrest*

*Right: Troy Roques, executive director of Vegas for Athletes*

whose names and likenesses were used for profit by corporate entities, gained significant momentum. The original intent of passing such policies was to empower college athletes to profit fairly from their personal brand, protect their rights under state and federal law, and give them entrepreneurial opportunities while they forged ahead in schooling and athletics for their university.

Roques' fire was stoked not only by the legacy of athletic blood running through his veins but also by the steady rhythm of family — his mother, a pastor who led with faith, and his grandparents, the immovable rock on which the family stood. From them came the creed: "We will find a way." It was a mantra that shaped him and his 12 male cousins, a guiding hand keeping them from straying too far. Yet as the eldest, Roques carried more than just their shared heritage; he bore the mantle of a big brother, protector and example. In that role, he felt called to shield them, to carve a



path of good works and to show that strength lies not only in muscle but in the choices a man makes.

"It's hard to look back on my life before this," Roques said, once a bodyguard to the Maloof family and a familiar face among celebrities and athletes. "Now,

it's about honoring youth athletes — those we've lost to sudden cardiac arrest and those we can still protect."

SCA strikes ages 12–25 without bias, he explained, noting that in Las Vegas alone, four student athletes have died in just two years. Through screenings of



*Ready, Set, Go.... Girls on the Run 5K start*

more than 1,000 kids, his team has uncovered a 3% abnormality rate — proof of lives potentially saved.

### **Girls on the Run Las Vegas: Building Confidence, One Step at a Time**

Amid the city's bustling entertainment scene, a different kind of spotlight shines on the next generation of young women finding their stride through Girls on the Run Las Vegas. This local chapter of a national nonprofit is led by Kate McLaughlin, executive director, whose own journey from discouraged young athlete to passionate leader has given her a deeply personal connection to the mission.

Girls on the Run began in 1996 in North Carolina, founded by triathlete and teacher Molly Barker. The Las Vegas chapter was launched in 2011 by Stephanie Lasure and now serves schools and communities across Clark County as one of 166 councils in the U.S. and Canada. Its mission is simple yet profound: to inspire girls to be joyful, healthy and confident through a curriculum that blends movement with mindset.

For McLaughlin, the work is personal.

"As a kid, I wasn't a standout athlete. My sisters won trophies while I collected participation ribbons. But as a new mom, I discovered recreational running and it made me feel strong."

That discovery led her to volunteer with Girls on the Run in 2012, eventually stepping into leadership in 2020.

The program serves third- through eighth-graders, combining 10 weeks of lessons on confidence, decision-making and resilience with physical activity that builds toward a capstone 5K Celebration Run. With just five staff members, Girls on the Run Las Vegas relies on more than 125 volunteer coaches each season and over 100 event-day volunteers, ensuring that every girl can participate regardless of financial circumstances.

The impact is clear. Teachers report girls using Girls on the Run skills in classrooms; parents notice newfound confidence. Moments like one recent 5K — where a girl who had finished returned

to hold her friend's hand across the finish line — show the program's heart.

"That's what it's all about," McLaughlin reflected.

As Las Vegas youth face pressures from social media, school safety concerns and the lingering effects of COVID-19, programs like Girls on the Run are more essential than ever. And as McLaughlin put it, "We may not know who these girls will grow up to be, but we know we're making it more likely they'll become their best selves."

Greenwood carries his father's legacy through mentorship and education. Roques turns family faith and athletic roots into life-saving advocacy for young athletes. McLaughlin transforms her own journey into a movement that helps girls discover confidence with every stride.

Their work shows that true brilliance is measured in lives saved, futures shaped and children empowered. Giving with wellness in mind reminds us that the greatest gift we can offer is a better future.

## Giving Back

### Morlon Greenwood Foundation

Each December, the Morlon Greenwood Foundation hosts its Annual Toy Giveaway at Sportsman Royal Manor (5600 Boulder Highway). This year marks the fifth celebration, in partnership with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. Supporters can help by donating, volunteering or simply spreading the word to bring joy to children in need.  
mg52.org | admin@mg52.org  
702-907-2556

### Vegas for Athletes

This holiday season, Vegas for Athletes brought heart health to the spotlight with free youth cardiac screenings. In early November, at T-Mobile Arena, they screen 500 athletes during the Hall of Fame Classic basketball series, gifting each participant tickets to the game. Looking ahead, their signature VFA Summer Games — an Olympic-style competition with 14 sports and 5,000 youth participants — will light up the Thomas & Mack Center in June 2026. It's competition with a cause, proving that giving back can be as exciting as the games themselves.  
vegasforathletes.org  
info@vegasforathletes.org  
702-683-0899

### Girls on the Run Las Vegas

On Dec. 6 at UNLV, Girls on the Run hosts its Fall 5K Celebration, where hundreds of girls cross the finish line hand in hand with their mentors. Volunteers are needed to cheer, coach and support. For those looking to give, their 2025 Giving Season Match Campaign doubles every donation, fueling programs that help third- through eighth-grade girls in Clark County build confidence, resilience and strength.  
girlsontherunlv.org/5k  
girlsontherunlv.org/donate  
702-637-3055



*Crossing the finish line for a national Girls on the Run 5K*





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# AI PAZZI OPENS IN LAS VEGAS: FABIO VIVIANI BRINGS ITALIAN FLAIR TO RAMPART CASINO

By Elaine & Scott Harris

Chef Fabio Viviani's journey has taken him from humble beginnings to "Top Chef." Over decades, he has created a refined, inviting atmosphere with a thoughtful menu of hand-made pasta, fresh seafood, indulgent entrees, decadent desserts and hand-crafted cocktails for his guests to savor with every sip and bite.

Viviani, as well as being a celebrity chef, is also a renowned hospitality developer, restaurateur, best-selling cookbook author and television personality. He was born and raised in Florence, Italy, and then moved to the United States in 2005 to pursue greater opportunities in the culinary world. His passion for hospitality and talent, paired with his effervescent charisma, has quickly propelled him to global fame.

He first captured attention in the United States in 2008 as a standout contestant on Bravo's hit series "Top Chef," where he was voted "fan favorite." His success on the show led to a return appearance on "Top Chef: All Stars" and launched a thriving career that continues today.

Since then, Viviani has opened more than 40 restaurants, bars, and hospitality venues across the country, with many more in development. Through his company, Fabio Viviani Hospitality (FVH), he oversees a growing portfolio of acclaimed establishments, including LAGO, Giostra, Seville, Taverna Toscana, Taverna Costale, Adelina and Chuck Lager. His latest venture, Ai



*Chef Fabio Viviani*

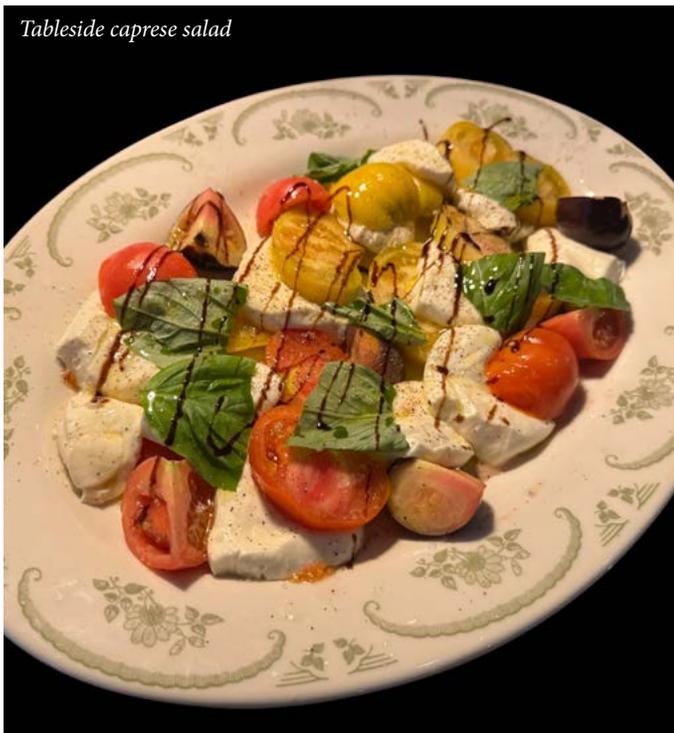
Pazzi, is located inside Rampart Casino at The Resort at Summerlin in Las Vegas.

**Chic Compass:** We have one more celebrity chef in Las Vegas — that's you. You grew up in Florence, correct? Was it your grandmother,

mother or father who influenced you? How did you get your culinary inspiration?

**Chef Fabio Viviani:** I didn't grow up running around creating great food. My family was broke — we had no money.

Tableside caprese salad



Fabio's Wagyu meatball

Everyone in the house was working three or four jobs, including my grandmother and me. I started working at 11 years old because we needed the money.

My very first job was at a pastry shop. It was like a bakery. I used to work from midnight to seven in the morning. The guy who owned the bakery also owned an Italian restaurant. So, after a few years, he said, Hey, do you want to come on the savory side? Yeah, absolutely. I love it too. And that's how I got into the restaurant business, the food business.

**Chic Compass:** You are like a self-made person then, pretty much.

**Chef Fabio Viviani:** Basically, I got stuck in the restaurant business. I didn't have much to do with it.

**Chic Compass:** One of the things you've said is that you have been transforming comfort Italian food into high-end cuisine. What does that mean?

**Chef Fabio Viviani:** I like to keep things traditional. Just because you can do something different doesn't mean

you should. Now, Italian food is very peasant in a good way. It's rich in flavor, but it's poor in the sophistication of its ingredients. You know, there are some amazing ingredients — the Italian bottarga, the truffle, the stuff that no one else has. But in general, Italian food is very approachable. My idea is to create an environment that feels casually refined and present the food in a way that the service is more elevated, as you would find in Italy. The ambiance is better. The quality is the same. We elevate the experience, and the food is kept traditional.

**Chic Compass:** What are some things that you really want people to look at when they come to Ai Pazzi in Las Vegas for the very first time? What should they try?

**Chef Fabio Viviani:** My perfect first dinner would be about sharing with your table. Start with Italian focaccia — we make it fresh here every day. Then order a caprese salad and a fettuccine Alfredo, both prepared tableside. You'll have fresh mozzarella made right in front of you, with fettuccine worthy of Rome for the weekend. After that, share a chicken parm — because chicken parm — and a bistecca alla Fiorentina,

a two-and-a-half-inch T-bone. Why wouldn't you?

**Chic Compass:** What do you want people to take away after they've just had that wonderful meal you just talked to me about? How would you want them to feel if they walked out of here and looked at the lovely restaurant, the decor, the ambiance, the rooms?

**Chef Fabio Viviani:** What I would like people to take away after they have dinner here is that maybe, although you're not in actual Italy, the food is as good as it is out there. Because the way we prepare it, the craftsmanship, the things that we make from scratch, and the things that we make are just like we used to make them back then.

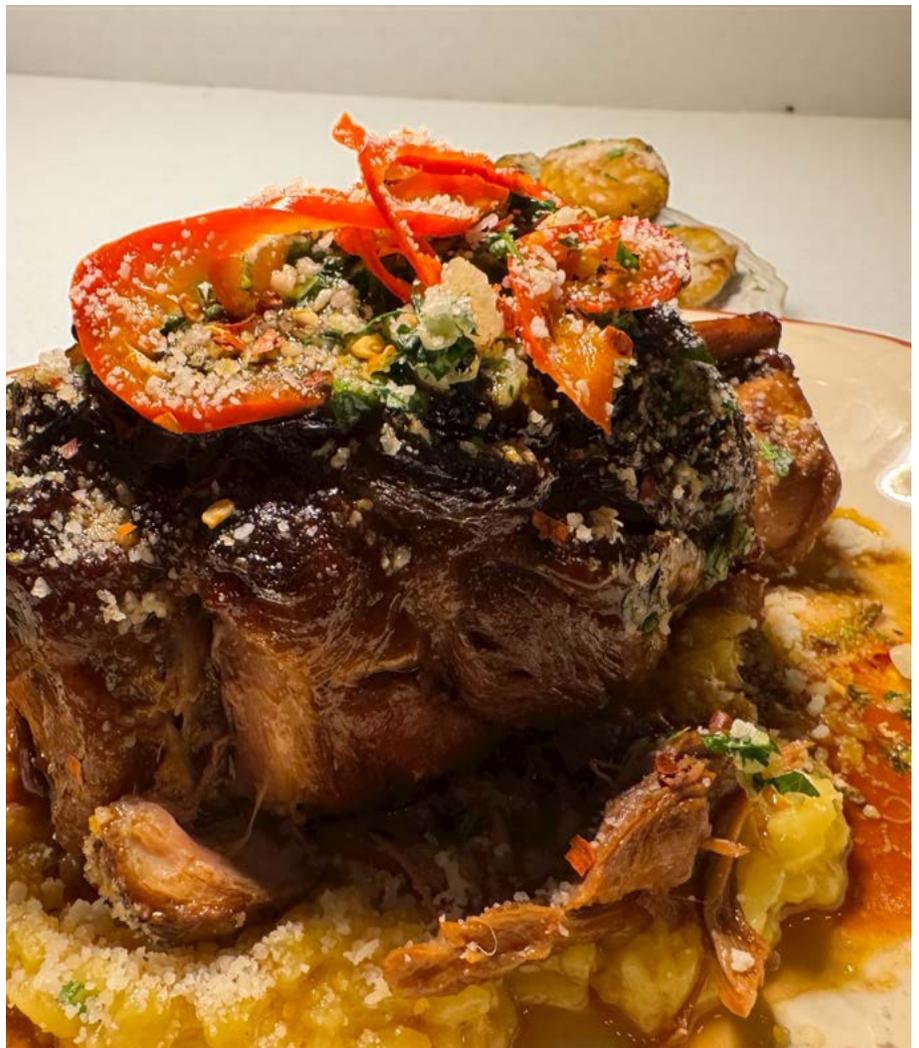
**Chic Compass:** Many people may want to become a chef or learn how to be a chef. What would you advise somebody, no matter what age, whether they're 18 years old or 40 or 50?

**Chef Fabio Viviani:** Listen, whether you want to be a television chef or a restaurant chef, there's a big difference. A TV chef has to look good on camera



and make a dish. A restaurant chef has to please people and make a thousand of them. Regardless, here's my advice: If you want to be in the restaurant business, start with a very simple principle — do it right, or someone is going to make you do it twice. That's the only way to succeed. You can't mess it up. It's an expression of love coming from you to them.

*With Ai Pazzi, Rampart Casino in Summerlin continues to raise the bar, as the addition of the global celebrity chef brings Italian tradition and elevated hospitality beyond the famed Las Vegas Strip. For more information, visit [aipazzi.com](http://aipazzi.com).*



*Top Left: Mediterranean branzino*

*Top Right: Roasted potatoes*

*Right: Ossobuco alla Milanese*

# faith

## RICHARD FEMENELLA DEVOTES HIS EFFORTS TO THE AUTISM COMMUNITY

By Debbie Hall / Photography courtesy of Richard Femenella

There is a cliché that states, "money makes the world go around," and funding (money) is indeed needed by charities and nonprofits to provide services and products. The Autism Community Trust focuses on raising funds and donating to charities and nonprofits that provide services to the autism community in Southern Nevada.

There are several organizations offering resources, support groups and therapeutic services for individuals with autism and their families. Families for Effective Autism Treatment of Southern Nevada (FEAT) is a great first step on the journey of finding the right organizations that can fill those needs.

Richard Femenella is a highly talented individual dedicated to the hospitality industry and the autism community. He is the owner of Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys, a classic steakhouse, and a hospitality veteran with a history of helping to establish other restaurants in the city, including Charlie Palmer. Femenella is the co-founder and president of Autism Community Trust and a longtime supporter of FEAT.

He can share the history of the city of Las Vegas, as well as the evolution



*Richard Femenella, owner of Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys*

*Meat done to perfection at Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys*



*Enjoy a specialty cocktail at Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys*



of how the community has become a strong place for families with children, young adults and adults on the autism spectrum.

Femenella moved to Las Vegas in 1998, and in December 2000, his wife gave birth to their first child, a son named Joey Vegas, much later in life. "Right before he was two years old, in 2002, we started seeing that he was missing milestones. My wife realized that something was wrong. I stayed in denial for a little while," Femenella explained.

"The first time we reached out for help was to the organization Families for Effective Autism Treatment of Southern Nevada," he said. "This organization was comprised of approximately six mothers who had trunks full of pamphlets on various types of therapy and interventions for children with autism. Diane Butler came to our house. She was brilliant, very informative, and over the last 20 years has become one of our very best friends. However, at the end of her presentation on various therapies, there was one piece of bad news. There were no direct services for Applied Behavioral Analysis [ABA] therapy in Nevada. ABA is an evidence-based approach that has been proven to be the most effective method for helping individuals with autism succeed in everyday life and interactions. It can help with communication, behaviors and life skills and is based on a positive reinforcement approach. It requires registered behavior technicians [therapists], and we did not have a single trained therapist locally. There were a few occupational and speech therapists, and only one doctor at the time who was qualified to give an autism diagnosis."

As parents, they had a decision to make: how to help their child? While they were willing to move to help their son, they instead decided to get involved, try to help and contribute to developing services.

Autism has been diagnosed since the 1940s. One of the first doctors to study autism, Ole Ivar Lovaas, Ph.D.,

managed a department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), dedicated to autism research, studies, health and therapies.

Over 20 years ago, Dr. Lovaas was invited to give a speech in Butler's backyard to almost 100 people. His team at UCLA would then begin to fly into Las Vegas and start training mostly teenagers in parents' homes, including Femenella's home. They were trained and supervised in how to conduct applied behavior analysis therapy for children with autism.

One young man, Andrew Devitt, stood out. At age 15, he was a long-haired, skateboarding teenager when Femenella's wife hired him to work with their son and learn alongside specialists from UCLA. Today, Devitt owns one of the state's largest therapy centers for children with autism. He developed therapies using ABA. His business, Sports Social, serves nearly 900 children each week. He also owns Alien ABA, which accepts health insurance to ease the burden on families. Together, his organizations employ more than 75 certified therapists and a staff of 90.

The Lovaas Center in Las Vegas was founded in August 2005 by Erik Lovaas, the son of Dr. Lovaas and a former staff member of the UCLA Clinic for the Behavioral Treatment of Children. The center provides early intensive behavioral intervention (EIBI) for individuals with autism, building on Dr. Lovaas' 40 years of research at UCLA. They offer a comprehensive, home-based "wrap-around model" of treatment, collaborate with other agencies and provide training to parents and instructors in the Lovaas method of applied behavior analysis. Dr. Lovaas died in 2010, and his son Erik continues his work today.

Femenella's partner in his ventures is Julie Ostrovsky, who, along with Femenella and other parents, hired Jennifer Strobel as the director of FEAT. Strobel assembled a strong board of directors, and FEAT has since grown into one of the state's largest nonprofits serving individuals with autism. Strobel's team includes



*Above: Richard Femenella, owner of Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys, stands in front of his vintage car outside the restaurant*

the talented Yasadora Cabrera, who helps Southern Nevada's Spanish-speaking families and serves about 7,000 families in the Hispanic community. Devitt also donates space at Sports Social in his 20,000-square-foot facility.

"FEAT and Sports Social are the hub and where parents and families should start in our city to help their family member with autism," Femenella said.

For many years, Southern Nevada could not meet the educational requirements needed to be certified to work with the autism population. Potential professionals had to leave Southern Nevada to obtain the credentials required by insurance companies. There are now several programs that help train professionals in this field.

Additionally, to become certified to work with the autism community, a registered behavior technician must have two years of clinical experience. However, Southern Nevada did not offer any clinical environments that met this requirement. When Las Vegas

Mayor Shelley Berkley was the CEO of the Touro University Western Division, she developed a clinic for autism treatment. As a result, individuals seeking to live in Southern Nevada can now become therapists and remain in the state.

Autism diagnosis and interventions can be costly. In 2009, the Nevada Legislature passed AB 162, sponsored by then-Assemblyman James Ohrenschall (not yet Sen. Ohrenschall). This landmark bill required state-regulated health benefit plans to cover screening, diagnosis and treatment of autism spectrum disorders for individuals younger than 18, or up to age 22 if still in high school. Signed into law by Gov. Jim Gibbons, AB 162 dramatically expanded access to services for families across Nevada.

Passing this expensive and often controversial legislation took a grassroots effort, led by Jan Crandy, a volunteer advocate and pioneer of ABA in Nevada. The autism community mobilized with strength and persistence, through a lot of letter writing and phone calls to legislators and the governor, to ensure this

critical access-to-services bill became law.

"I'm proud to say in my new restaurant, Mae Daly's, we run a vocational training program here during the day for young adults, mostly on the autism spectrum, but recently trained someone with Down syndrome. Anybody who wants to learn is welcome, but there's a process they must go through to be part of the program," Femenella stated.

"We work with the Desert Regional Center in the state of Nevada, which funds training hours for young adults. They pay for job coaches through Empower Us. We are also in a partnership with Andrew Devitt and Sports Social, who developed a one-year training program that must be completed before we can proceed at Mae Daly's. This vocational program is a prerequisite for admission to our program. Young adults learn about hygiene, how to be a good employee, how to be on time for work, as well as other considerations necessary for employment. Then a state agency vets the candidates before we bring them in.

"Most of the time, Mae Daly's will put them on our payroll, and they'll become my employees until I think they're ready to get a job out in the world."

Dr. Temple Grandin, who has autism and is widely regarded as the foremost authority on autism in the United States, visited Sports Social during a visit to Las Vegas. She was extremely impressed that Devitt had found a way to bring together everything she had envisioned people with autism needed and put it under one roof, and was very impressed with the center.

"When families come to me for help, I refer them to Sports Social and Families for Effective Autism Treatment. Andrew Devitt gives them space in his 20,000-square-foot facility for their offices. I introduce them to Andrew, Yasadora or Jennifer, whether they're English- or non-English-speaking people," Femenella said.

"Over the last 23 years, Southern Nevada has been fortunate to have incredible people step up and invest in the autism community. I am honored to be part of this effort, driven by philanthropists, kind-hearted individuals and the wonderful people of Las Vegas who decided to change the landscape for those on the autism spectrum in our city," he stated.

*Autism Community Trust raises money through concerts and musical events. For more information, visit [autismcommunitytrust.org](http://autismcommunitytrust.org).*



Above: Part of the crew at Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys

## Resource List

### Families for Effective Autism Treatment of Southern Nevada

Families for Effective Autism Treatment of Southern Nevada (FEAT) is a Las Vegas-based nonprofit organization that provides support, resources, education and community programs for families and individuals affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD). [featsonv.org](http://featsonv.org)

### Autism Treatment Assistance Program

Nevada's Autism Treatment Assistance Program (ATAP) was created to help parents and caregivers with the high cost of evidence-based therapies for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The statewide program provides temporary financial assistance for treatment of children under age 20 who are diagnosed by a physician, psychologist, child or adolescent psychiatrist, pediatric neurologist or other qualified professional. [adsd.nv.gov/programs/autism/atap/atap](http://adsd.nv.gov/programs/autism/atap/atap)

### Nevada Early Intervention Services

Nevada Early Intervention Services (NEIS) provides free support to families, offering specialized instruction, audiology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and vision services. The program helps infants and children from birth to age 3 reach their full potential through information, education, resources and family support. [adsd.nv.gov/Programs/InfantsToddlers/Infants\\_Toddlers](http://adsd.nv.gov/Programs/InfantsToddlers/Infants_Toddlers)

### Desert Regional Center

The Desert Regional Center (DRC) is a state agency serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Southern Nevada, including the Las Vegas area. DRC focuses on community inclusion and self-sufficiency, offering person-centered planning, service coordination, job training, supported employment and various levels of residential care. [adsd.nv.gov/programs/intellectual/intellectual](http://adsd.nv.gov/programs/intellectual/intellectual)

## Medicaid

Medicaid is a joint federal-state program that provides health benefits to individuals who meet specific eligibility requirements. It covers people with disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities. [medicaid.gov](http://medicaid.gov)

## Supplemental Security Income

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a needs-based program that provides monthly payments to individuals with disabilities, blindness or age 65 or older who have limited income and resources. To qualify for SSI due to ASD, an individual must have a medically determinable impairment that significantly limits their ability to function. [ssa.gov/ssi](http://ssa.gov/ssi)



*Above: Three participants in Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys vocational training program*

*Below: Richard Femenella, owner of Mae Daly's Fine Steaks & Whiskeys, outside the restaurant*





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# ART HEARTS FASHION: GLOBAL DESIGN TAKES THE RUNWAY

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By Chanelle Hayes-Sessions

This past fall, New York Fashion Week (NYFW) powered by Art Hearts Fashion took place at the Angel Orensanz Foundation, featuring five days of runway shows and designer presentations. More than 40 international designers showcased collections representing diverse styles and cultural influences, including Alexis Monsanto, Almee Couture, AnaOno, Coral Castillo, Cross Colours, Danny Nguyen, Haus of Harleen, Kene Kaya, Keziah, Mila Hoffman, Montecristi NYC, Raquelle Pedraza, Starielle, Vizcarra, Wanda Beauchamp and others.

The season featured several firsts, including the debut of a Cambodian designer on the NYFW stage, alongside presentations from Ecuador and Guatemala, highlighting Art Hearts Fashion's global reach. Philanthropy was also part of the week, with AnaOno hosting

a patient-led runway show to raise awareness and support breast cancer research.

Art Hearts Fashion expanded internationally with its London debut in September at St. John's Church in Hyde Park. The sold-out show featured designers Giannina Azar, Styx Athletics, Charles & Ron, Mister Triple X, Carlos Pineda and Chavelis Playhouse, presenting collections ranging from couture to avant-garde streetwear. Erik Rosete, president of Art Hearts Fashion and designer of Mister Triple X, called the event a milestone, noting that London welcomed the show with energy and designers delivered their best on stage. Following its London debut, Art Hearts Fashion continues its global expansion with upcoming events in China in November and Ecuador in December, offering designers more opportunities to showcase their work worldwide.



DESIGNER: CHARLES & RON  
PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK GUNTER

DESIGNER: ALMÉE  
PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK GUNTER



**NEW  
YORK  
FASHION  
WEEK**  
POWERED BY  
ART HEARTS FASHION



**NEW  
YORK  
FASHION  
WEEK**

ART HEARTS FASHION

DESIGNER: CORAL CASTILLO  
PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK GUNTER



DESIGNER: CARLOS PINEDA  
PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK GUNTER





**NEW  
YORK  
FASHION  
WEEK**

ART HEARTS FASHION

DESIGNER: VIZCARRA  
PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK GUNTER

DESIGNER: RICHARD HALLMARQ  
PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK GUNTER



RICHARD HALLMARQ



NEW YORK FASHION WEEK  
POWERED BY  
ART HEARTS FASHION



DESIGNER: GIANNINA AZAR  
PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK GUNTER

# EXPLORING THE ARTISTIC AND HISTORICAL RICHES OF CODY, WYOMING

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By Elaine Harris

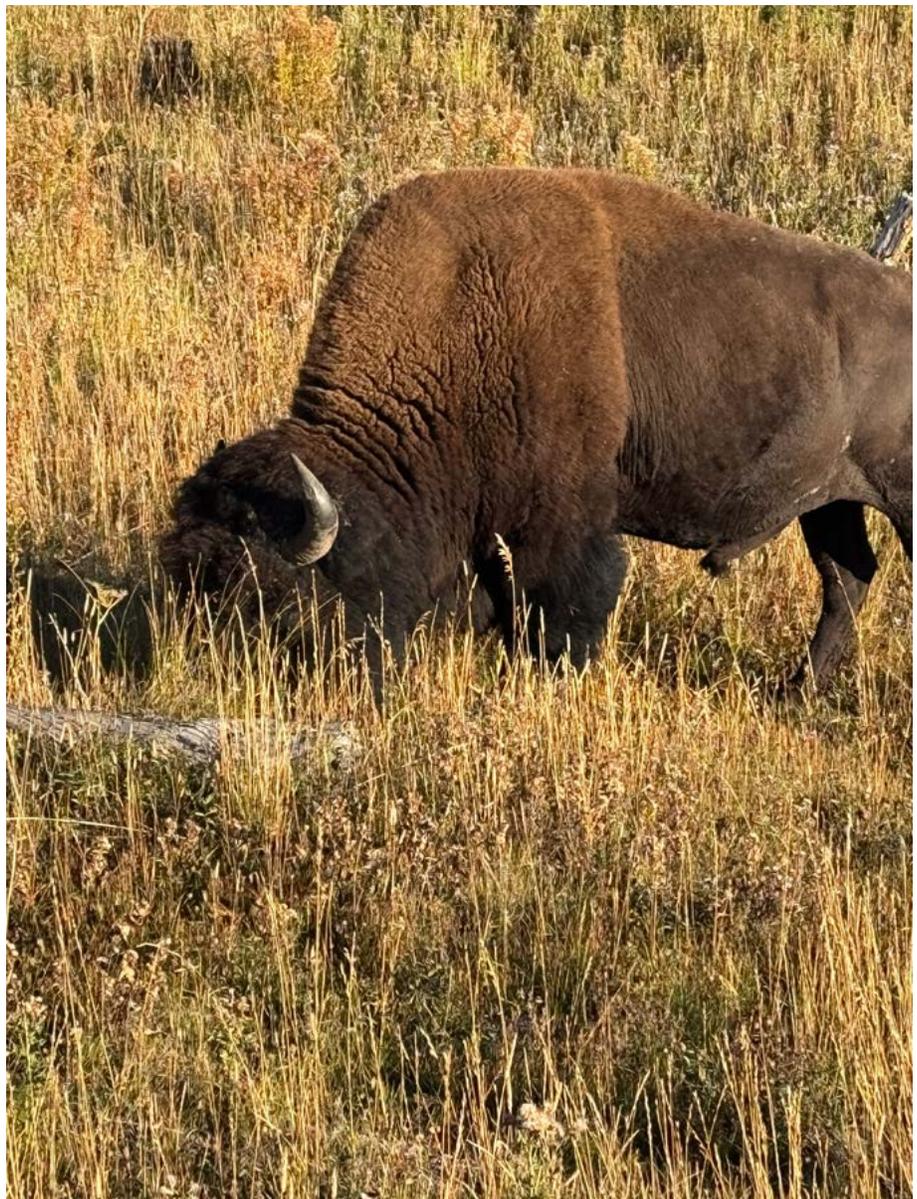
Known as the "Home of the Great American Adventure," Cody, Wyoming, stretches across the valley east of Yellowstone National Park's entrance, encompassing the towns of Cody, Powell and Meeteetse.

Every year, thousands of visitors flock to Yellowstone Valley, but it is this region where those seeking Western adventures immerse themselves in authentic experiences. Here, visitors reconnect with the spirit of the American West, enjoy the tranquility of the outdoors, marvel at spectacular vistas and engage in a variety of recreational activities and adventures.

Many choose to spend time at genuine dude or guest ranches, deepening their connection to the land and its heritage. During our visit, my husband, Scott, and I witnessed exceptional creativity through art inspired by the region's vibrant cultural legacy.

## **The Buffalo Bill Center of the West**

The town's namesake, William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, a legendary scout and showman, played a pivotal role in the city's founding and development. Today, that legacy is preserved and celebrated at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, which attracts thousands of visitors annually.



*Above: Bison in Yellowstone National Park*

This renowned complex is dedicated to the culture and history of the American West and features an entire wing honoring Buffalo Bill himself. With five exceptional museums under one roof, the center offers a two-day admission for a nominal fee. Among its highlights is the Whitney Western Art Museum, recognized as one of the "Best Art Museums" by *Newsweek's* Readers' Choice Awards and lauded for its impressive collection of historic and contemporary western art.

The Buffalo Bill Museum showcases artifacts from the famous Wild West show, bringing legendary figures such as Annie Oakley, Sitting Bull and Pawnee Bill to life through film and curated exhibits. The center also houses the Plains Indian Museum, Cody Firearms Museum and the Draper Natural History Museum.

As an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West connects people to the history and culture of the iconic region. Visitors leave with a deeper appreciation for the enduring legacy of Buffalo Bill and the region he helped shape.



### **Annual Art Celebrations in Cody**

Each September, the bustling town of Cody hosts hundreds of Western art enthusiasts for two significant events: the annual Rendezvous Royale and the Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale. As artists ourselves, my husband, Scott, and I eagerly embraced this opportunity to explore the rich art culture of the American West.

"Authentic artistry happens with inspiration, and there is plenty of that here," said Katrina Southern, Park County Travel Council's marketing manager.

### **Rendezvous Royale: A Celebration of the Arts**

The Rendezvous Royale is a week-long celebration of the arts featuring



*Above: Quick Draw sculpture artist (top), and Elaine Harris exploring relics of Old Town Cody*

demonstrations, auctions, workshops and lectures. Central to this event is the Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale.

My experience began with a three-day painting workshop on the porch, led by acclaimed artist Michael Ome Untiedt. As a new master's student in art, I delved deeply into oil painting under Untiedt's expert guidance. I quickly shed any apprehension as Untiedt enthusiastically instructed both novices and professionals, helping hone artistic perception and technical skills.

His website ([michaelomeuntiedt.com](http://michaelomeuntiedt.com)) showcases his achievements, awards and the galleries that represent his work. Untiedt's oil paintings capture classic scenes of the American West — landscapes teeming with cowboys and the spirit of a bygone era — yet they resonate with modern collectors through his lyrical, evocative brushwork.

"You need to develop perceptual skills to accomplish a shift into the three-dimensional aspect from a flat image," Untiedt explained, sharing stories that provided inspiration on and off the canvas.

He recounted his journey: "Thirty-five years ago, I started selling landscape paintings and decided I wanted to show more emotion in my paintings, and naturally, painting cowboys seemed like a good fit."

Growing up on a small ranch in Western Colorado surrounded by nature, Untiedt developed a keen eye for shapes and forms. Encouraged by his grandmother and mother, he became involved with the Art Students League of Denver, which supported his artistic growth and helped him find his voice.

"Being an artist is a life filled with rejection, but it is a viable way to work and make a living," he reflected, recalling the words of Dr. Jacob Bronowski, author of "The Ascent of Man." "Not language, use of tools or intelligence, but man's ability to transfer beauty and culture, but through art."

Untiedt encouraged us to identify our



*Above: In painting mode during the Painting on the Porch workshop (top), and Master artist Michael Ome Untiedt with Elaine Harris*

strengths and cultivate our unique artistic voice: "What do you want your painting to look like? If one hundred people look at your painting, they must know that it is your painting."

After several days of dedicated instruction, each participant completed a painting under Untiedt's mentorship, and the joyful expressions on everyone's faces reflected their contentment with the outcome.

## Cody's Historic Landmarks and Culinary Experiences

On day four of the celebration, we explored some of Cody's art galleries and local eateries.

We visited the historic Irma Hotel, named for Buffalo Bill's youngest daughter and built in 1902 for \$80,000. The public first entered its doors on Nov. 1, 1902. Stepping inside the building, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, we admired vintage photographs and enjoyed the lively atmosphere at the bar. We treated ourselves to the town's best prime rib dinner and salad bar, surrounded by fellow diners eager to experience the grandeur of this landmark.

As we left, a crowd gathered for the nightly "shootout" in front of the hotel, where costumed cowboys staged a playful showdown. We then retired to our hotel, ready to explore Yellowstone National Park the next day.

## Exploring Yellowstone National Park

As the first national park and located less than an hour from Cody, Yellowstone is an ideal base for day trips. Visitors can enter from the east and explore the entire lower loop of the Grand Loop Road. With limited time between art events, we seized this opportunity. The park's dramatic rock formations, pine forests and lakes were awe-inspiring, but the sight of American bison roaming freely along the roadside was truly unforgettable. These majestic animals often halt

traffic as they rest, asserting their right of way. We witnessed large herds of bison, bubbling thermal vents with vibrant colors and steaming cauldrons that warned visitors to keep a safe distance.

We arrived at Old Faithful just in time to see its spectacular eruption, joining hundreds of onlookers for this iconic event. Nearby stands the Old Faithful Inn, the largest wooden structure in America, built in 1903 from local logs and stone. This National Historic Landmark is the most sought-after accommodation in the park. Walking through its grand halls, we felt connected to generations of travelers who have marveled at both the inn's architecture and the wonders of nature just beyond its windows. Every twist and turn of the road brought us a deeper appreciation of one of our nation's most beloved national parks. We paused to take in the moment, but our agenda soon pulled us back toward the creative energy of Cody, where art continues to reflect the surrounding area's natural beauty.

## Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale Draws Crowds of Art Enthusiasts

Our trip continued with Rendezvous Royale's main event, the 44th annual Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale, featuring over 100 outstanding artists.

One of the foremost painters of the landscapes of the American West, Albert Bierstadt wrote, "The artist is out to tell his portion of history as well as the writer: a combination of both will assuredly render it more complete." While a picture can paint a thousand words, these acclaimed artists demonstrated their artistic voice through a parade of paintings and sculptures displayed in two silent auctions and two live auctions.

As we settled into our seats for a night of high-priced bidding and a sumptuous catered dinner and drinks to keep us well-fed and hydrated, the bidders gazed upon their sought-after artistic acquisitions as the display began along the runway.

One by one, the frenetic energy of auctioneer Troy Black of Black and Associates Auctioneers Inc. filled the room. His loquacious, auctioneer-trained tongue urged bidders to "Bid high, bid often, and if I can't hear you, raise your hand," prompting patrons to purchase an impressive 93 pieces, bringing in \$930,000.

"A Matter of Utmost Urgency," which garnered the Spirit of Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale Award, was the overall highest bid. Artist Santiago Michalek received

*Below: Quick Draw artists at work*



*Right: Quick Draw artists display their artwork*

a purchase price of \$42,500, outpacing his retail price of \$38,000. The People's Choice Award went to artist Krystii Melaine's oil painting, "Guardian of the Wilderness," which doubled its retail price at auction to \$26,000.

As the drone of the auctioneer faded into the night, we congratulated some of the generous bidders, knowing another full day of live art action awaited with the annual Quick Draw sale and auction, which would conclude the week of sales and benefit local art organizations, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West and the Cody Country Chamber of Commerce.

A lovely fall day awaited us as crowds made their way to the small park where 28 artists stood by their easels and art stands, focused on their emerging works of art. It is with utmost concentration that these artists must give to complete a masterful piece of work, while others mill about, asking questions and offering comments.

"I have been here 8 years, but this is my 7th year," Michalek said. "I received a phone call asking me to participate years ago, and here I am today, enjoying the moment," he continued as he decisively placed the paint on his historic train image.



As the other artists filled their canvases with images of teepees, bison, cowboys and landscapes, we hesitantly made our way back to the auction tent as the buzzer rang, ending the artists' time. When the artists entered the tent holding up their creations, the grand painting parade began down the catwalk. Each artist displayed their work,

including Michael Ome Untiedt, whose painting quickly sold for \$5,000.

The end of the lively auction garnered almost \$200,000 for local entities and artists' organizations, but the fun and memories were priceless. By the end of the week, with a combination of live, silent and online sales, the 44th Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale had reached more than \$1 million in sales, helping the artist community thrive and keeping the memory of the American West alive.



*Left: Artist Santiago Michalek proudly displays his auction painting*

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# CAGED TOOLS AND LOCKED AISLES

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By Joseph Amato

## HOW BIG-BOX SECURITY IS RESHAPING HOME IMPROVEMENT AND WHY IT COULD IGNITE A SMALL-BUSINESS COMEBACK

The new normal: shopping through glass and cages

Walk into any big-box home improvement store today and you'll be confronted with locked cabinets long before you meet a salesperson. Power tools sit behind cages; tools, electrical fixtures and even plumbing fittings are held away from the ordinary consumer under lock and key.

The retailers' rationale is straightforward: theft, especially organized theft, has driven "shrink" levels to painful proportions. According to a 2023 National Retail Security Survey from the National Retail Federation (NRF), average shrink rose to 1.6% of sales in fiscal year 2022, with more than \$112 billion in lost inventory revenue.

This security buildup is not hypothetical. In 2024, Target announced the closure of nine stores in four states, explicitly citing theft and organized retail crime as creating unsafe conditions and unsustainable performance. Whether or not one agrees with the decision, it crystallized the retail sector's dilemma: how to best protect people and profits.



Two things can be true at the same time — retailers are facing real losses, and our public conversation about theft is often clouded by politics. After decades of annual shrink reports, the NRF paused its 2024 reporting, acknowledging that its data and methodology could not keep up with escalating incidents and in-store aggression.

A companion NRF/Loss Prevention Research Council (LPRC) study published in December 2024 highlighted a 93% increase in shoplifting incidents since 2019 and rising violence that affected companies, consumers, and the bottom line. Other analysts urged caution, noting that the term "organized retail crime" lacks consistent definition

and is often conflated with other forms of inventory loss, making it difficult to identify a single cause. Theft is clearly costly, but it's less certain how much inventory loss comes from organized retail crime versus other causes, internal theft and accounting errors.

Even retailer voices aren't monolithic. Lowe's CEO Marvin Ellison said in 2023, according to Business Insider, that retail theft wasn't expected to have a material impact on the company's profits, emphasizing people and process over panic, which is an outlier stance among his big-box peers. Walgreens' CFO similarly conceded, "Maybe we cried too much," after the company stepped back some of its security spending, CNN reported.

But security has a cost — especially when consumers want to actually hold a product they are seeking to purchase. In home improvement stores, the feel is part of the allure: the weight of a drill, the tooth of a saw blade, the comfort of a wrench. Lock all the inventory away, and you force customers to wait impatiently for someone to allow them the opportunity to hold the item.

That friction shows up quickly. A 2024 Numerator survey found 27% of shoppers will either switch retailers or abandon their purchase when they encounter locked merchandise. Separately, field research, according to Retail Brew, reported average waits of 7.7 minutes to get a product unlocked at mass retailers, and I personally experienced a 22-minute wait when trying to purchase an electric hedge trimmer. The longer the wait, the higher the abandonment rate, and I can attest to that exact reaction.

Consumers are beginning to voice their frustration with these practices, saying in blogs and online forums that they still want hands-on shopping for "considered" purchases. According to Retail Dive, a global 2024 survey found that three in five shoppers want to see and touch items before buying, and more than two-thirds seek expert advice for higher-value purchases — exactly the

kind of consultative experience home improvement projects demand.

But there is a middle path that protects inventory without denying customers' direct access. One new direction may include benefit denial technology. Home Depot and Lowe's have piloted point-of-sale activation for power tools that remain nonfunctional until legitimately activated at checkout. Lowe's Project Unlock uses low-cost RFID tags so a stolen tool simply doesn't work, while a legitimate buyer retains proof of purchase.

These approaches shift deterrence from the aisle to the product, preserving open access while curbing resale value for thieves. No single solution fits every product, but optimizing open display and benefit denial beats locked cases and staff escorts for customer experience — especially in categories where customers truly want side-by-side comparisons when buying certain products.

Although it appears that this article is prosecuting home improvement stores as the most notorious culprit on this subject, the problem also exists at local pharmacies, big-box warehouses and other retailers, where criminal and theft prevention measures include encasing everything from health and beauty products to toiletries, razors, clothing, food and other everyday staples.

Ironically, the big-box tilt toward heavy security and minimal staffing has created an opening for independent retailers to compete for increased sales through easier access, expertise, and trust.

Independents can keep more merchandise reachable, enabling real comparison and fit-for-purpose selection with no wait. Owner-operators and tenured staff can guide projects, substitute components, and prevent returns — and they truly value their shoppers. A store that treats customers as neighbors rather than suspects builds loyalty and frequency, especially when big boxes have become caged fortresses.

These changes have had a profound

effect on the marketplace, evidenced by new unit growth. Ace Hardware, a cooperative of locally owned stores, added 215 new U.S. stores in fiscal year 2024 (net gain of 150) and reported record results, bringing its domestic count to 5,144 by year-end and 5,177 at the end of the first quarter of 2025, according to a company news release. That growth coincides with its strategy to double down on "experience" categories — including paint, power tools, backyard, and home renovation — where try-before-you-buy matters.

Consumers want to touch the things they're about to install behind drywall or bolt to a foundation. Independent companies can meet that unmet need while big boxes deal with prison-like optics and reduced staffing. And when the value is obvious, customers are often willing to pay a little more for independently sold products.

What big boxes can do is very apparent. It starts with swapping cages for activation and expanding point-of-sale activation in theft-heavy, high-touch categories. They also may need to rethink how display units are positioned.

This includes improving line of sight by lowering gondolas, widening sightlines, and placing more vulnerable items closer to staffed workstations to reduce both theft and customer waiting times. If something must be locked, guarantee rapid access, set measured response times, and increase staff to improve the customer experience. The goal is to decrease theft without alienating customers — investing in more sales associates is key because people are the best deterrent, and a visible, helpful staff can reduce inventory losses.

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# LAURA TAYLOR: A LIFE IN SONG, A LEGACY IN JAZZ

By Laura Henkel

*I*n the story of American music, some careers are defined not by a single genre or moment but by the way they weave across traditions, cultures and eras. Laura Taylor's path, spanning classical roots, disco success, platinum-record songwriting and a distinguished career in jazz, embodies that journey. Her voice, once heard selling Buicks and beckoning travelers to "Fly the Friendly Skies," would go on to resonate in recording studios, concert halls and classrooms. It is the story of a woman shaped by music from her earliest breath and who, in turn, has shaped music across decades.

## Roots in a Musical Household

Taylor's mother liked to say her daughter's first word was "Toscanini," though as a toddler she pronounced it "Toxcanini." That small detail says nearly everything about the household in which she was raised.

"In my household, there was music, music, music!" Taylor recalls.

Her mother, a gifted pianist who won a fellowship to Juilliard, gave concerts and taught at Syracuse University. Her

father, a World War II veteran studying on the GI Bill, moonlighted as a radio disc jockey who spun Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine and Peggy Lee for listeners and even interviewed Louis Armstrong.

She remembers her father playing the song "Laura" on the air for her third or fourth birthday and teaching her to sing the standards with his own rich baritone. Though his career eventually shifted to business, music remained their

*Above: Photo of Laura Taylor by Bradford Rogne*

*Right: Photo of Laura Taylor by Bradford Rogne*

shared language, even as the family moved from town to town.

## **A Voice Takes Shape**

By high school, Taylor's gifts were undeniable. In Monroe, Ohio, she starred in musicals such as "Annie Get Your Gun," "The Music Man" and "Oklahoma!" Her mother, recognizing her promise, brought her to Robert Powell at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Powell accepted her as a student and secured her a scholarship upon graduation. His rigorous bel canto method became the foundation of her technique, and Taylor credits his training for a career free of vocal strain or injury.

Powell's sudden death left her adrift. Around that time, she wore out a roommate's Nancy Wilson record and leaned on her father's guidance. A booking agent told her that if she could play and sing 10 songs, she could earn \$100 a week at the Van Cleve Hotel. Taylor assembled a repertoire, including "Take Five," "Laura" and "The Girl from Ipanema," and launched her professional career.

## **Finding a Studio Home**

Commercial work soon followed. Taylor's voice rang out in households across America in national campaigns for United Airlines and Buick.

"My mother was grocery shopping in Detroit and heard 'Wouldn't You Really Rather Have a Buick,'" Taylor laughs. "She said she broke down in tears buying toilet paper, telling people around her, 'That's my daughter's voice!'"

For Taylor, the jingles did more than pay the bills. They introduced her to her true love.

"The most important effect on my life from singing jingles was realizing how much I love being in a recording studio," she says. "It has been one of my real happy places."



But life was not linear. Marriage and two sons briefly sidelined her career. After six years, divorced and a single mother, she began again, working nights and writing songs into the early hours. At North Miami's famed Criteria Studios, she recorded demos that caught the attention of owner Mack Emerman. Soon she was singing background vocals on Firefall's "Elan," produced by Tom Dowd. The album went platinum, and Taylor received her first platinum album as part of the team.

## **A Miracle Named Tony Bennett**

She still remembers the weight of that demo tape in her hand, the quick heartbeat as Tony Bennett opened the door backstage at the Doral in Miami. She barely managed to say, "Mr. Bennett, I am a singer-songwriter, and you are my standard of excellence. This is a tape of some of my original songs." Bennett took the tape, shook her hand and closed the door.

"That was it. No hope, I thought," she remembers.

Two days later, the *Miami Herald* carried a surprise. Bennett had pulled out a pocket recorder during his interview and pressed play on Taylor's songs.

"She's really unique, you gotta listen to her," he told the reporter. "I think she's really something."

Taylor was stunned.

"Well, talk about validation! Hugely emotional moment for me! That was all I needed to know I was on the right track."

### **'Dancin' in My Feet' and the Disco Era**

When Criteria Studios needed a new vocalist for the theme of the pioneering television show "Disco Magic," Taylor was offered the track. "Dancin' in My Feet" went on to become a Billboard top-10 disco hit, putting her alongside songs such as "I Will Survive" and "Ring My Bell." The single led to a full album, featuring eight of Taylor's original compositions.

The Bee Gees' backup band, in Miami recording "Spirits Having Flown," played on the record.

One afternoon, walking down the hallway at Criteria Studios, Taylor suddenly froze. Barry Gibb was approaching. She braced for a polite nod, then realized he was humming—not a Bee Gees classic, but one of her songs.

"My first thought was, 'Oh no! Did I copy one of his songs?!'" Taylor laughs. Instead, Gibb stopped, smiled and told her he thought the melody was beautiful. Then he added the words that stuck with her: "You should be writing all the time."

"I couldn't believe it. I was on cloud nine," she recalls.

The disco wave also brought her to national television. Taylor performed



*Above: (L-R) Laura Taylor, Jerry Orbach, Tony Lo Bianco, and Tony Bennett at Laura Taylor's opening performance at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City*

"Dancin' in My Feet" on "The Midnight Special" alongside Wolfman Jack, Sylvester and Chic, and later appeared on "The Dinah Shore Show" and other broadcasts celebrating the era.

### **Encounters with Legends**

The studio continued to open remarkable doors. Taylor sang backup for George Martin, the Beatles' legendary producer. At a friend's urging, she slipped him a demo. Days later, Martin called, declaring her song "Think I'm in Love" a hit. He even came to her Miami condo to help her rework the demo.

Diana Ross eventually recorded the song for her "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" album, and though it landed as the B-side, the album went platinum.

"I confess to having a great deal of pride," Taylor says, "having a platinum record for a song I wrote the music and lyrics to. And yes, I think it changed me for the better!"

### **On the Road: New York, Atlantic City, Las Vegas**

That recording led to appearances on "The Merv Griffin Show," where Merv Griffin insisted Taylor perform her own

compositions. She went on to perform at Caesars Palace, the Waldorf Astoria and Steve Wynn's Golden Nugget. Comedian Don Rickles brought her on as his opening act, eventually leading to a move to Las Vegas and a long association with the Desert Inn.

Michael Feinstein once stopped mid-performance at Bellagio to introduce her from the stage as "a very special talent." Encounters with Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and others solidified her place in the pantheon of working musicians whose talent was recognized by legends.

### **Jazz Evolutions and Turning Points**

Though disco and cabaret gave her wide recognition, it was jazz that increasingly defined Taylor's artistry. A partnership with pianist Steve Kuhn in New York revealed new harmonic possibilities that deepened her singing. Recording with Joe Henderson at the jazz club Fat Tuesday's affirmed her place among jazz greats.



*Left: Photo of Laura Taylor by Bradford Rogne*

Her place in musical history, she believes, lies in striving always for excellence, from jazz standards to originals. She is proud to be in the Disco Hall of Fame, prouder still to be a platinum songwriter, and grateful for the joy of sharing music across generations.

"I wrote a song that went platinum and I am in the Disco Hall of Fame," she says. "The joy really lies in the writing and still having a dream."

### **Concert Calendar and Album Spotlight**

Taylor's music continues to unfold on-stage and in the studio.

Her newest project, "Think I'm in Love" with pianist and arranger Uli Geissendoerfer, revisits the classic she penned and reimagines it for today with fresh arrangements and heartfelt performances.

"When people play the album 'Think I'm in Love,' I hope they will feel a happy sensuality," Taylor says. "Many of my life experiences are in the lyrics, and the music expresses my soul."

Audiences will have the chance to hear Taylor live this season:

#### **Dec. 14, 2025 – Holiday Concert with Uli Geissendoerfer**

The Bootlegger Bistro, 1–3 p.m.

Presented by the Las Vegas Jazz Society, this afternoon concert blends seasonal favorites with Taylor's signature style.

Her recordings, including "Think I'm in Love" and her previous jazz CDs, are available on all streaming platforms. For those who still treasure the warmth of vinyl, Taylor also plans to release the new album as an LP, a fitting nod to the analog roots of a career that has always embraced both history and innovation. For Taylor, the joy is not just in looking back but in making music that still sings forward.

In Las Vegas, she married Dr. David Mulkey, a jazz lover who became both her life partner and collaborator. With Mulkey's support, Taylor recorded six jazz albums, performing with luminaries such as Eddie Gomez, Lewis Nash, Red Holloway, Jack Sheldon and the Candoli Brothers.

### **The Teacher's Heart**

Today, mentoring the next generation gives Taylor immense joy. With Mulkey, she endowed a chair at UNLV, now held by David Loeb. She has been a guest artist and composer with the DownBeat award-winning Jazz Band One, featured on their CDs and live concerts.

"I feel very motherly toward them," Taylor says, "and yet playing jazz together transcends age and we are all speaking the same language."

### **Reflection and Resilience**

Taylor has lived through seismic shifts in the industry, from analog to digital, from disco to streaming. She embraces Alexa and Spotify even as she dreams of pressing her latest record to vinyl.

"Rather than bemoan the loss of some high notes, I am relishing all the 'life' in my voice," she reflects.



# FAYM AND THE POWER OF MUSIC

By Kendall Hardin / Photography courtesy of FAYM

After retiring as the founding music director and conductor laureate of the Las Vegas Philharmonic in 2007, Hal Weller didn't exactly lay down his baton.

Two years later, he launched FAYM — the Foundation to Assist Young Musicians — as an organization to offer scholarships and mentoring to young, rising-star musicians pursuing their careers.

He was joined in this venture by opera diva Luana DeVol and the late Marilyn Laroque, a longtime friend of Weller who championed classical music. Together, they secured pro bono legal assistance and arranged concert venues for the first wave of scholarship students.

## Catapulting Rising Stars

Winning the first scholarship was 18-year-old violinist Krzysztof (Kris) Rucinski from Poznan, Poland, whom Weller urged to apply to the prestigious Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. At the end of 2007, Rucinski flew to the United States, where

he performed recitals in Las Vegas, Flagstaff and Sedona to rave reviews.

He won the Howard Hanson Scholarship to Eastman at \$30,000 per year, with FAYM raising the remaining \$20,000 annually until he graduated with high honors in 2012. He went on to receive his master's degree from the Carnegie Mellon School of Music in Pittsburgh. Today, Rucinski is a tenured member of the Ulster Philharmonic in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Other scholarship recipients followed, including pianist Igor Lipinski, currently on the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin; violinist Liam Mansfield, a graduate of the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University and now a member of the Helsinki Philharmonic; and pianist Corbin Beisner, a graduate of the Hartt School of Music in Hartford, Connecticut, who is currently a soloist performing throughout Europe and the United States.

## Violins for Kids Is Born

Two years after its inception, FAYM created Violins for Kids (V4K), designed for

underserved students who traditionally would not be exposed to classical music and could not afford training at an early age.

The program provides youngsters with instruments, materials, two to four weekly class lessons, a tuition-free weeklong summer camp experience in June and special musical trips. Private instruction is offered to those who qualify through audition. Classes range primarily from first through eighth grade, with several advanced students continuing through high school.

The V4K program has evolved from two volunteer teachers and 12 students at one school to 11 paid teachers, three student assistants, and nearly 300 students from 51 schools in Southern Nevada.

Lessons are held on the east side of town at the East Las Vegas Community Center and East Las Vegas Library, and on the west side at the Pearson Center. The Las Vegas City Council waives

*Above: "FAYM-ster Stars" at the 2024 winter concert (Richard Brusky)*

rental costs for the east-side locations, and the Clark County Commission waives the rental fee for the Pearson Center.

## Inventing a New Kind of Model

From the beginning, it was FAYM's goal to change the paradigm from the typical business model. As a nonprofit organization, it is astonishing that FAYM has no office, classroom rental or CEO expense, as all support is donated.

All instruments are purchased at wholesale cost, thanks to Juan Soto, proprietor of the Mariachi Depot in the Boulevard Mall, who also donates the cost of all repairs on FAYM's instruments. All support services, such as accounting, legal, secretarial and web design, are donated pro bono by qualified volunteers and board members.

For every dollar donated to FAYM, 95 cents goes to the mission of securing more scholarships, instruments, training materials and teacher wages. FAYM's budget for this year has grown to over \$220,000.

Since its founding, FAYM has received contributions from donors in 31 states and the District of Columbia, as well as from Australia, Canada, China, Colombia, East Java, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Poland, Puerto Rico, Sardinia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

## How the V4K Program Works

V4K targets schools in low-income areas, primarily serving underserved

*Top Right: Hal Weller, Jose Soto and Art Ochoa present Mariana Carbajal with her well-earned Golden Violin.*

*Middle Right: Mariachi Estrellas de FAYM musicians, like Sofia Rodriquez and Hilda Cortez, must perform repertoire from memory*

*Bottom Right: Cellist Riley Hislop performs in style at the 2024 winter concert (Richard Brusky)*



students of color. First-year students are recruited along with their parents, who are required to attend classes and learn to play the violin alongside their child.

The children receive small violins and bows in a case, while their parents receive a full-sized violin. At recitals, parents and children perform side by side. Students' first lesson before using their violin is how to make a proper bow to the audience in unison.

After two or more years of lessons, youngsters can audition to become part of the Mariachi Estrellas de FAYM orchestra or several FAYM string orchestras, including a cello orchestra.

As students become more proficient in mastering the violin, they can also apply for "Golden Violin" status, which requires submitting an essay on their desire to advance musically and auditioning before a panel of evaluators.

If the panel recommends the student, the young musician is allowed to choose from a collection of higher-value "golden violins" valued at up to \$2,000 to accompany them on their musical journey.

Each June, the tuition-free weeklong summer camp offers students multiple string orchestras, mariachi ensembles, instrumental training, percussion and rhythm classes, and fun electives.

### **FAYM's Impact on Kids and Families**

Arturo "Art" Ochoa and Weller joined forces as the ideal pair to invent this unique program. The two men launched V4K with Weller's professional credentials, contacts and fundraising acumen, complemented by Ochoa's dedicated programming experience.

As a former teacher and principal in Henderson and the inner city, Ochoa created after-school music programs that gave underserved children a safe place to be, helping them avoid after-school distractions in their neighborhoods. The astonishing results of his

Suzuki violin training for kindergarten and first-grade students immediately validated the potential of kids learning music at a young age.

Weller heard about Ochoa's programs to "make tomorrow's Philharmonic" and visited the classrooms to see firsthand how kids were excelling not only in music but academically in all subjects.

"I committed my educational career to making sure that impoverished students did not fall through the cracks as I did," said Ochoa, himself a high school dropout who later earned a GED, an undergraduate degree in education and a master's degree in educational administration.

"The advantages of early music education are amazing," he underscored. "It builds teamwork, self-confidence and self-worth, along with social skills and the ability to succeed. It engages kids in learning how to learn alongside their peers. Putting kids on stage is a powerful motivator.

"I didn't expect the Violins for Kids program to create an academy of professional musicians, although several of our gifted students have gone on to forge careers in music," Ochoa said. "I was focused on creating the next wave of professional teachers, lawyers, doctors and entrepreneurs through improved academic excellence for at-risk students."

### **Building a Legacy on FAYM's Horizon**

This November, FAYM enters its 18th year with new possibilities and challenges. FAYM is ready to expand into North Las Vegas and the south end of town if donated space can be secured. FAYM also needs a centralized administrative office and storage space to house its instruments and teaching materials as it serves more students throughout the Vegas Valley.

The FAYM board, currently chaired by Ochoa, is considering creating V4K "in a box" as a turnkey module program to

sell to other cities so they can replicate the unique success of FAYM.

As Jamie Bernstein, daughter of conductor-composer Leonard Bernstein, summarized on her visit to Las Vegas, "FAYM is about so much more than learning a musical instrument. It's about giving kids a chance to see themselves as worthy, capable and beautiful. And that, in turn, helps them become the wise, compassionate citizens of tomorrow who will make the world a better place."

### **How to Become Part of FAYM**

- Sign up for the free FAYM newsletter online at [thefaym.org](http://thefaym.org)
- Buy a violin for a first-year student
- Help fund a collegiate scholarship for rising star musicians
- Donate space to expand FAYM's programs in North Las Vegas and the South Valley
- Donate to FAYM's tuition-free summer camp in June
- Donate office space to help FAYM consolidate its operation
- Donate storage space to FAYM to house its violin collection and training materials
- Underwrite a Golden Violin for advanced students
- Contribute \$250 to support one year of lessons for a child
- Refer a child who would benefit from the FAYM program

### **Contact Information**

Program & Curriculum: Tim Thomas, [timthomasFAYM@gmail.com](mailto:timthomasFAYM@gmail.com)

Donations & Contributions: Hal Weller, [halweller70@gmail.com](mailto:halweller70@gmail.com)

Phone (Spanish): Art Ochoa, 702-271-1742

Phone (English): Tim Thomas, 208-514-9723

*For more information, visit the FAYM website at [thefaym.org](http://thefaym.org).*

## How does music affect child development?

Music profoundly impacts child development by enhancing cognitive skills, including memory, language and problem-solving, as well as fostering social-emotional growth through emotional expression and improved interpersonal skills. Music also develops physical abilities by improving motor skills and body awareness. Incorporating music into a child's life stimulates brain development and creates essential neural connections, setting the foundation for future learning and overall well-being.

## Benefits of music on child development

- Early language development
- An increased ability to learn foreign languages
- Improved mood and emotional regulation
- Physical endurance
- Patience and discipline
- Fine motor skills, often honed through learning instruments

## What are the educational benefits of music lessons?

Learning and playing an instrument increases brain power and functionality, boosting IQ and improving concentration. Music accelerates brain development for youngsters, helping to develop:

- Participation in a group
- Enhanced social skills
- Ability to express emotions
- Enhanced self-concept by sharing music from other cultures
- Refined listening skills, noticing changes in tempo or pitch
- Creativity and imagination
- Learning new words and concepts
- Exploring cause and effect
- Improved balance, coordination and rhythm
- Improved motor skills learned by playing musical instruments
- The joy of mastering a learned skill

From "The Creative Curriculum for Preschool Children" by Diane Trister Dodge and Laura J. Colker



*Above Top: Christafer Mitchell joyfully hugs his new best friend*

*Above: Darin Mau opened his violin case for the first time*

*Left: Zendayah Poindexter's whole family celebrated new violins for her and her dad*

*Photography courtesy of FAYM*



# SISTER ACT

## YOUTH FOR YOUTH IS GETTIN' JAZZY WITH IT FOR ITS 4TH ANNUAL HOLIDAY CHARITY CONCERT

By Stacey Gualandi

The holiday season in Las Vegas is filled with traditions: the Glittering Lights at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway, the Bellagio Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, ice skating at the Cosmopolitan and the Ethel M Chocolates Holiday Cactus Garden.

Now you can add the Youth for Youth Holiday Concert to that winter wish list.

In just three short years, this charity benefit concert — founded by pianist and newly selected U.S. Presidential Scholar Roxy Jones — has raised more than \$100,000 for underserved and homeless youth in the Clark County community. With generous support from presenting sponsor ITW Commercial Construction and many other supportive sponsors and donors, the concert continues to grow each year.

"I always think each year is as big as it's gonna get, but it always gets bigger," Roxy said.

Youth for Youth was born out of the pandemic and Roxy's desire to perform on the piano after a period when she wasn't allowed to.

It offers skilled high school students the

chance to play holiday favorites and classical music for enthusiastic audiences while raising critically needed funds for local youth organizations, including Nevada Partnership for the Homeless Youth, the Boys & Girls Club and the Forgotten Song Foundation.

"I feel a lot of people like the cause, want to support the cause, and because of that, they're very dedicated to coming," Roxy said.

Audiences also get to see a gifted group of young musicians perform year after year: Roxy on classical piano; her younger sister, Skai Jones, on violin; twin brothers Jun and Charles Hong side by side on piano; and many more.

This year is no exception. The fourth annual event returns to Clark High School on Nov. 29 at 3 p.m., but this time under new leadership.

Skai is taking on the annual tradition now that her sister Roxy is in her first semester at Yale on a full-ride scholarship, where she's part of the Yale Piano Collective and Yale University Chamber Orchestra (YUCO).

"I think after seeing how much Roxy was

able to do, I thought I could continue it and do even more, so I said, 'Yeah, I should do this!'" Skai said. She co-chaired the event last year with Roxy.

Skai says familiar faces will return, including crowd favorites — and now high school freshmen — Jun and Charles Hong.

"They were two of the originals, so they definitely have to come back," Skai said. "Everyone who comes says, 'I'm so excited to see the twins this year.'"

Speaking of twins, Skai said she has some new sheet music up her sleeve. She's invited the talented Wunder twins — Jaron on bass and Ethan on saxophone — from the Utah-based band Plant Based to bring a little jazz fusion to the yuletide playlist.

In fact, the Youth for Youth 2025 celebration will kick off a day early when the Wunder twins and Plant Based join the Hong twins for a night of jazz on the Vic's stage in downtown Las Vegas. Then the following night, for the first time, Skai will perform in a special string quartet set. She is also building a stronger social media presence ahead of the big night.

Skai is also thrilled to announce that money raised will help this year's chosen charity, The Just One Project, tackle food insecurity and assist underserved youth in Las Vegas.

Founder Brooke Neubauer said a donation like this couldn't come at a better time, especially around the holidays.

"We're going to focus this money on helping our youth case management program get things that [our youths] need to be more independent," Neubauer said. "You bring them in, you get them food, you triage them and their immediate needs and then you focus on getting them self-sustainable."

"Every time we have talked to The Just One Project, they say they really try to emphasize creating a space for people to not feel ashamed of asking for help and I love that about them," Skai said.

Neubauer said she is proud to be working with these "Christmas elves" and admits that once you get bitten by the bug of giving back, it becomes a part of your life.

"These young women are our future; they are the future of the nonprofit sector; they are the future of our community," Neubauer said. "I think it's just amazing how Skai and Roxy can inspire so many people to come together for a great cause."

Skai and the Hongs recently attended the 2025 Moonridge Philanthropy Leaders Summit and are now pledging to raise \$30,000 for The Just One Project.

*Top Right: Skai Jones performs on the violin during the 2024 Youth for Youth Holiday Concert*

*Middle Right: Charles Hong (L), Jun Hong (R) perform on the piano during the 2024 Youth for Youth Holiday Concert*

*Bottom Right: Roxy Jones addresses the audience at the 2024 Youth for Youth Holiday Concert*

*Photography on this page courtesy of Cashman Photo*



"But I hope to surpass that," Skai said.

Roxy said she'll be back to play her holiday hits but is proud to pass the conductor baton to Skai.

"I think it's really nice that Skai is going to continue the tradition of these holiday concerts and that my dad's helping her," Roxy said. "They always make jokes about how they're gonna raise more than I ever did. Ha!"

Skai, a high school junior, said the experience is both a challenge and an opportunity. She's taking to heart the advice her dad passed down to Roxy: "always think bigger!"

"I just think it's super cool how we get the opportunity to be able to do this," Skai said. "I think it shows you that if you put in the work, you can really make something out of it and raise all this money to help youth in our community."

And now, as Las Vegas embraces its holiday traditions — from glittering lights to ice rinks and chocolate cactus gardens — the Youth for Youth Holiday Concert proudly takes the stage with them.

If Skai, Roxy and their troupe of talented teens have their way, they'll exceed their \$30,000 goal for The Just One Project, proving that music, generosity and community can make the holidays brighter for everyone.

*For more information, visit [youthforyouth.vegas](http://youthforyouth.vegas) and [viclasvegas.com](http://viclasvegas.com).*

*Top Right: The Just One Project founder Brooke Neubauer, Skai Jones, Special Project Manager Cynthia Lewis*

*Right: The Just One Project Food For All program*





# STITCH PERFECT

## COSTUME LOVERS, PERFORMERS AND DESIGNERS ARE GOING GAGA FOR ON STAGE ESSENTIALS

By Stacey Gualandi / Photography courtesy of On Stage Essentials

### And sew it begins.

On Stage Essentials — a boa, button and bobbin-filled boutique — isn't just your basic stitch and supply shop. It's a revolution in Las Vegas' legendary costume landscape.

From skull caps to silamide to whopper popper snaps, this 2,000-square-foot space is Sin City's one-stop shop for performers, designers and creators looking to make show-stopping costumes.

On Stage Essentials opened its doors with an epic, over-the-top grand opening party earlier this year — complete

with drag artists, burlesque singers and, of course, Elvis — setting its designs on a "community-forward" space for wardrobe pros, entertainers, dancers and beyond.

"We're just creative people, so we love making everything," said Natali Germanotta Dolan, founder and costume designer. "Vegas just keeps growing bigger and bigger, and more and more talent is emerging every single day. I think it's so important for us to be here and support them."

Germanotta Dolan and her husband, documentary photographer Alex Dolan

(a Parsons School of Design merger), own Topo Studio, a custom costume business.

She has designed couture pieces for private clients and A-list touring artists such as Gwen Stefani and Brandi Carlile, as well as for her sister Stefani — better known as Lady Gaga — for her Las Vegas residencies.

"The caliber of performers here is almost unmatched," Alex Dolan said. "It's definitely a world-class city in terms of performance and entertainment. I think

*Above: Grand Opening Party costume display*

it deserves supporting industries to help the creative people who make those shows happen."

Alex Dolan said over the past five years, they often found themselves in Las Vegas working on residencies and other projects (Natali designed custom pieces for "The Magician's Study"), but couldn't find materials or supplies they needed locally at the last minute.

"We've talked about it for a long time, probably over a course of a few years about needing something like On Stage Essentials," he said.

After hemming and hawing, this dynamic design duo ultimately decided to open their first haberdashery haven in July.

"It was really important to us to make it a place that people can come and not feel scared and overwhelmed by everything and could just have fun and be creative," Germanotta Dolan said. "That was a big reason why we hired costumers Kimmy and Justin because they know the products and can show everybody around our store."

Inside the inviting state-of-the-"dart" store — inspired by classic vintage Vegas glitz — you'll find fabric displays; trays of trims, tools and threads; rows of boas; appliqués, feathers, sequins, rhinestones and more, in all sizes and skin tones.

"We know a lot, but we also want to learn from each other what everybody needs, and how we can best support them," Germanotta Dolan added.

Now, wannabe Beyoncé and Gaga Monsters have a hub where they can buy costumes to wear at the concerts, or they can make their own.

"For any touring wardrobe community,

*Top Right: Founder Natali Germanotta Dolan, Stacey Gualandi, Second Wind Media founder (and dad!) Joe Germanotta.*

*Bottom Right: Las Vegas locals shopping for supplies*



I think this would also be right up their alley, being able to shop, even in bulk for 15 to 30 dancers for a show," Germanotta Dolan said. "That's important to be able to go to a city and stock up your wardrobe cases."

On Stage Essentials is definitely a family affair. Buried in all the bling are several photos of Lady Gaga in iconic costumes co-created by the skilled siblings.

And no one is prouder of their daughters than Cynthia and Joe Germanotta. Both were front and center at the opening, orchestrated by New York-based

marketing and branding company Second Wind Media, owned by Joe Germanotta and his business partner Gabby Gabriel.

"I love hearing [Natali and Stefani] collaborate when they're on the phone, talking to each other about the stage, the costumes, the dancers, the look," Germanotta said. "As a father, that's probably the warmest thing to hear your kids on the phone talking to each other and liking each other."

He said his youngest ("I should have had more!") has always been into fashion.

"From the time Natali was little, she was always drawing and doodling," he said. (She admitted even in church!)

Gabriel, one of *USA Today's* Top Entrepreneurs of 2024, said Germanotta doesn't just encourage his daughters' talents.

"Joe really sees the potential in people...and I think he's very good at letting people make mistakes to grow and to reach their potential," Gabriel said. "I think it's not a coincidence that both of his daughters are so successful."

On Stage Essentials now plans to reap what it sews. Not only does it provide consultation services and retail space with even more fabrics and notions in stock, but there are also plans for a local delivery service, community programming and industry mixers.

"If we don't have it, we'll get it for you. If you don't know how to make it, we'll figure it out together or we'll make it for you," Germanotta Dolan said.

With demand high, they may even have to expand.

"I don't think this space is big enough," Germanotta hinted.

His daughter added, "I think any incredible opportunities that come up in the future will all be just gravy."

A stitch in time...

*Top Right: Founder Alex Dolan, drag performer MooNaysha, Natali Germanotta Dolan*

*Right: Second Wind Media founders Gabby Gabriel and Joe Germanotta*

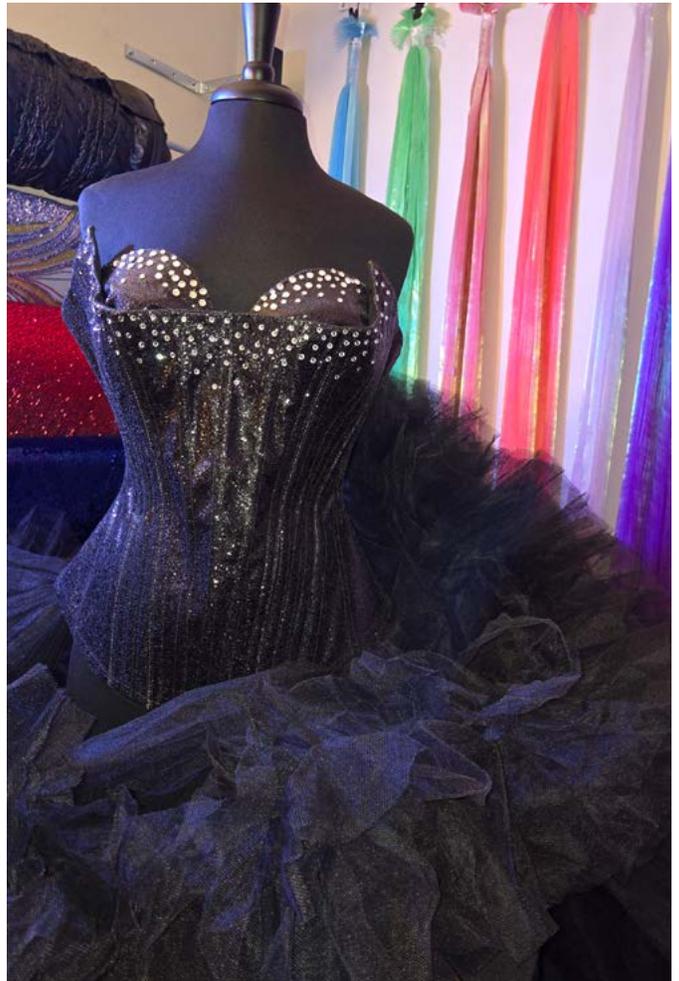
**Facing Page**

*Top Left and Bottom Right: Natali's costumes on display*

*Top Right: Alex and Natali Germanotta Dolan*

*Bottom Left: Gift bag with On Stage Essentials sewing supplies*





# ABOUT TOWN

**Chic Compass Launch Party at Otonomus Hotel** (Photography by Cashman Photo)

**Right:** (L-R) Laura Henkel, Dot Sevens, Carlo Roncancio, Weston Random



**Above:** (L-R) Robert Dolan, Cindy Fox, Sondra Lynch, David Tupaz, Ann Parenti, Tiffany Chang, Yuan-Fen Lai, Lucy Chang

**Left:** (L-R) Brian G. Thornton, Lance Robins, Sheila Gradford, Larry Thielen Jr, Cary Vogel, David Tupaz



**Foundation for an Independent Tomorrow Annual Gala** (Photography courtesy of Cashman Photo)

**Above:** (L-R) Andy Blumen, Janet Blumen, Robert Dolan, Alexandra Carden, George Carden

**Top Right:** (L-R) Robert Dolan, Cami Christensen

**Below:** Louie Tandiono-Cellona, Dave Siefert, Gordan Vukovic, Anna Siefert, Robert Dolan



**Above:** (L-R) Stanley Uyeda, Lynette Chappell, Robert Dolan

**Below:** (L-R) Stanley Uyeda, Gordan Vukovic, Robert Dolan, Dimitrije Curcic

**Bottom Left:** (L-R) Rob Sheridan, Robert Dolan, Andy Blumen, Richard Jost





**Filipino American Museum Filipino Town Marker Unveiling on Oct. 9, 2025**

(Photography by Victor Esquivel)

**Above:** (L-R) Philippine Senator Risa Hontiveros, Rozita Lee, David Tupaz, Philippine Consul General Adel Cruz, Carl Magno, Catherine Cruz

**Right:** Philippine Senator Risa Hontiveros speaks to the audience at the Filipino Town Marker unveiling

**Below:** Nevada State Representative Dina Titus speaks to the audience at the Filipino Town Marker unveiling hosted by Commissioner Tick Segerblom



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