

Personal journeys

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIVES
OF PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY

Lifestyle of a determined woman



Danielle deBenedictis with her husband, Peter Karlson, and their grandson, Adre Karlson, 10, at her home in Palm Beach. RICHARD GRAULICH / THE PALM BEACH POST

Danielle

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64 years. Danielle's parents met when her mother, Anita, went to New York to pick up Luis, and her father, Daniel, was waiting on the wharf to pick up his sister, who had gone to South America on vacation. They were returning on the same ship.

"This was in the day when it was a big ordeal if a family member took a transatlantic ship," Danielle says.

Danielle's parents kept up their romance during World War II, through love letters that Danielle's mother bundled up in pink ribbons and saved her entire life.

"My father, after receiving the bronze star at Guadalcanal, came home from four years of war to visit my mother in Boston, and my uncle said to my father, 'If you don't marry her now, someone else is going to!' My father thought he was coming to see a girlfriend and ended up with a wife!"

They made a home in Boston, where her grandmother was a patron of the Milton, Mass., library and family friends included the Kennedys.

Danielle devoured books – "reading was a big part of my life" – and also devoured the example of her enterprising aunts.

"It was my 11 aunts who convinced me I could do and be whatever I wanted," she recalls. "Female strength and independence was always in my genes. My father was raised by his 11 sisters after his father died before his birth, and his mother died a few years later. His sisters did whatever they could to keep their family together – thriving careers in antiques and real estate. My father, having been brought up by fiercely strong women, made me strong and independent."

Danielle recalls wanting to forge her own way by the age of 4.

One of her favorite family stories was when she went off to kindergarten at a private academy, and "I didn't even say goodbye to my parents. I just marched up the school steps and never looked back."

After graduating at 16 from high school and 20 from college, with French as her major, Danielle went to the Sorbonne in Paris. She also speaks fluent Italian.

"I wanted to be self-supporting and not dependent on a man," she says. And when she analyzed what she did well – she was editor of her college newspaper, president of the debate society and also had the lead in school plays – she decided to blend all those skills and become a lawyer.

A globe-trotting lawyer, mind you. Though her father was a lawyer himself, and though he had raised her to be independent, "he wanted me to have a softer life, get married, have children and be taken care of."

At her 50th high school reunion from her French Catholic high school in Boston, when the girls asked her why she wanted such a big life, her answer was "my uncle was a citizen of the world."

For six decades, her Uncle Luis "would vanish for months for National Geographic, sometimes with little more

VIDEO: Hear Danielle deBenedictis tell the story of how a Palm Beacher persuaded Billy Joel to play 'Piano Man' at the Summer House.

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than a pith helmet, quinine water and a medical kit," explains Danielle.

Known to both Middle Eastern monarchs and Mexican mule drivers, Marden was called "the very spirit of the National Geographic Society" in his 2003 obit. "He was former chief of the National Geographic foreign editorial staff, photographer, writer, filmmaker, diver, sailor, navigator, pilot, linguist, raconteur, boon companion – and oh, yes, explorer ..."

Marden's wife, Ethel Cox Marden, also influenced the young Danielle, who spent summers at their Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home overlooking the Potomac in McLean, Va. Ethel was the deputy director of the National Bureau of Standards, where she helped create the first computer languages.

She embodied a rare mix of refinement and risk-taking, of femininity and force.

"She was a gourmet cook, had a double life of sorts, and I spent summers with them, wanting to emulate her," Danielle says. "Everything they did was extreme and high-level excitement ... there was nothing ordinary about their life."

Uncle Luis and Aunt Ethel might have slowed down when he retired from the Geographic in 1976. Instead, as the magazine wrote in his obituary, "the couple sailed a ketch across the Atlantic Ocean from England. In the Bahamas they ran aground and the boat was destroyed. They turned around, built a new one, and the following year sailed across the Atlantic without mishap."

Danielle was "determined to be just like her," she says. "Aunt Ethel was my role model – a woman with a wonderful feminine side who also was extra successful in a man's world."

Ethel drove a fast sports car, a Jaguar XKE, and worked all day – then would come home to throw "the most unbelievable dinner parties ... salons where the intelligentsia of the world gathered," Danielle recalls.

"My Aunt Ethel lived to be 100 years old before she passed away in 2012. She lived to see me recognize her habits."

Rebel with a cause

Danielle created her own high-level excitement, getting involved in politics before she graduated from Boston University Law School.

She refused to wear a cap and gown to her graduation as a protest against the Vietnam war.

"I bought a peasant dress from a peddler and wore that instead of my cap and gown," she recalls. The money for the cap and gown went to Cambodian refugees.

Her father had a "fit" about the entire thing, until he realized he could easily recognize his defiant daughter amid the



Danielle deBenedictis with her son, Christopher (left), husband, Peter Karlson (right), and parents Daniel and Anita. CONTRIBUTED FAMILY PHOTO

caps and gowns. Most of the other students were men.

Danielle decided she wanted to be an assistant attorney general, because "I wanted to argue constitutional cases that changed the law as opposed to being involved in commercial rights of wealthy individuals as I would be if I worked for a big firm."

She tried her first case against Jim St. Clair, who was Richard Nixon's lawyer in Watergate. "And I won the case! It became front-page news ... which was even more ironic because when I went into the courtroom the security was trying to separate me from the rest of the lawyers because I was a woman. I had to keep explaining, 'But, I am a lawyer!' That's just how it was."

Danielle was named one of the "Ten Outstanding Young Leaders of Greater Boston" for her work representing the Commonwealth and the Boston Herald commended her courtroom expertise: "Anyone who knows her, has opposed her in litigation, read her briefs, or seen her in action in the court, has no doubt that she is outstanding."

A run for U.S. Congress followed. Her boss, Attorney General Robert Quinn, ran for governor and lost to Michael Dukakis, "but I was so actively involved

in that campaign, that I decided to run for Congress myself. I was 29 years old and the incumbent had been there nine terms. Not only was he undefeated, but nobody ran against him. And no one ever won, including me."

She did, however, secure 37 percent of the vote – and a husband, in the form of a campaign worker named Peter Karlson.

"My mother insisted I must go out with this nice Peter Karlson, and I declared, 'Mom, I'm running for Congress, I have no time to date!'"

"But then one night after a campaign event, a friend of mine – a woman with MS whose husband had left her – she was the state's spokesperson for handicapped rights – needed assistance getting home. I told Peter I can't go to the 'after party,' as she needed a ride.

"Next thing I knew, at about 3 a.m., Peter and I were in his car, and we took her home and got her settled in. Then we drove back to Boston as the sun was rising. Peter invited me to his apartment for breakfast on Beacon Hill.

"By this time, I hadn't contacted my campaign manager for hours, and it was now 8 a.m. She said 'where in the

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