

LIFESTYLE | PEOPLE

Finding her voice

By Lisa Deaderick | 6 a.m. Aug. 14, 2016



Anna Danes — Howard Lipin



Anna Danes was 43 when she took up singing lessons — because her daughter had had enough of them.

"Grace told me in the car that she was done with singing: 'Mom, I'm bored with it and I am not singing anymore!'" Danes recalls. "I waved my finger at her from the steering wheel and said, 'You are going because it's paid for!'"

But when they got to the studio, her daughter sat in the corner, folded her arms, and wouldn't budge. So, the teacher asked Danes if she wanted to try, and since she didn't want to waste the lesson, she did. Now, more than three years later, she's recorded two albums, is working on a project featuring more than a dozen of San Diego's female jazz singers (The Jazz Divas), and is the founder of Jazz on Cedros, a happy hour event held each month in Solana Beach featuring singers and musicians from San Diego and abroad.

Danes, 47, lives in Solana Beach with her 11-year-old daughter from a previous marriage and is the founder of feature (Gregory Page.) She spent some time taking about her road to becoming a singer, her memories of fleeing communist Poland in 1979, and her recent breast cancer diagnosis.

Q: Did you see yourself becoming a full-time jazz singer?

A: Never in a million years. I ended up finding an incredible mentor at California Music Studios in Encinitas, Larry White, who's worked with pretty much everybody I idolized. It felt so comfortable working with Larry, developing my musical skills. ... I was not intimidated stepping into the professional music arena so late in life, and I worked very hard; sometimes taking as many as two to four lessons a week to make up for lost time, learning all I could and watching other performers. I was on the fast track to develop myself. That was only just over three years ago. I still sometimes can't believe it. I just decided to go for it.

Q: Your family fled communist Poland for Sweden in 1979?

A: We fled communism just before martial law was declared in Poland in 1979 and the borders were closed, shortly before Solidarity (a Polish trade union) blew up. I was 10. No one told me we were leaving for good. I never had a chance to say goodbye to my friends and never saw some of my family again. We left because my parents, like most Poles, felt communism was a totalitarian regime, with few personal freedoms and extremely limited opportunities. So we escaped to Sweden on a tourist visa, thinking we'd immigrate there. But Sweden wanted to send us back; they were not accepting economic refugees, only political ones. My dad was an engineer and we applied to the Canadian embassy in Stockholm. We had an interview, and we were in. Canada took us because it needed engineers.

Q: What do you remember about Poland before you left?

A: There was no freedom of speech. And you did not know who was your friend or who was going to report you to the authorities, even for just speaking your mind amongst friends. My mom never got a promotion at work for years because she marched once in a pro-democracy demonstration. You were always being watched. I learned early to keep my real voice and feelings hidden and to be a chameleon. But I also remember the kids' version of growing up happy in a cute little touristy beach town on the Baltic Sea, which is not unlike Solana Beach, actually.

Q: You've had some health issues lately that you've blogged about, including a heart condition and a recent breast cancer diagnosis?

What I love about Solana Beach ... It's eclectic, laid-back, artsy, musical, fit, fun, and fertile ground for a lot of important San Diego entrepreneurship.

A: I was just diagnosed with early breast cancer, which I look at as another bump in the road. I was lucky that it was caught very early and, incidentally, in elective surgery. My heart has chronic pericarditis or inflammation of the sack. I think my very difficult and drawn-out divorce may have put a lot of stress on my health. I just want to heal now.

Q: What led you to share those personal challenges in a public way?

A: First of all, there is nothing more powerful than the truth. Second, I want to demystify cancer to others as I learn about it. And finally, maybe I can help somebody else by sharing my journey.

Q: What's getting you through each day?

A: Doing what I love, believing that something wonderful is about to happen every day, my normal life as a mom — it's very grounding and keeps you focused on what's really important. And big, big dreams and plans.

Q: Speaking of dreams, who were your favorite singers when you were first introduced to jazz?

A: Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and Chet Baker.

Q: Who are your favorites now?

A: Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald top my list, always. And then there's a long list that follows from Diana Krall to some of our amazing local jazz singers in San Diego, such as Whitney Shay.

Q: Do you play any musical instruments?

A: Nope, I don't play any instruments and I do not read music. I've sadly not had the time to develop these skills, yet. But I have a good ear and almost perfect pitch. My excuse is: "Ella didn't either!"

Q: When did Jazz on Cedros begin?

A: After my first album was released, and my vocals were ready, it was my natural desire to start performing more. I had some limitations to doing that locally. I was in the thick of a contentious divorce and a custody battle, so I could not be out "gigging" at night. And I realized, it really wasn't what I wanted to do anyway. A suggestion was that I do my own thing, and become the local curator of jazz, that way I can control the venue, the timing and the flavor of the event. It's a sophisticated happy hour event that's held once a month now at Solana Beach's Carruth Cellars.

Q: You were able to record your second album at the iconic Capitol Records in Hollywood. What did it mean to you to record there?

A: It was pretty much "wow" the whole time! I was spellbound. And the production team knew it, so they sweetened it for me and brought out Sinatra's microphones for me to use, shared stories about the studios and the building, and even set up a recording booth in the middle of Studio A, just like Frank liked it, and we recorded the last song like that there. It was something I will never forget.

Q: What have you learned about yourself as a result of the challenges life has thrown your way?

A: It's not what's thrown your way, but how you react to it. Change is inevitable so embrace it, don't fight it. Appreciate your life and everything in it — it could be worse! Your family and friends are the real gold.

Q: What is the best advice you've ever received?

A: It was from my dad, or maybe he got it from Nike and never told me: "Just do it."

Q: What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A: That up until fairly recently, I was very timid, insecure and overweight.

Q: Describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: An early morning walk on the beach or run in Torrey Pines, followed by breakfast at Swami's in Encinitas or T's in Solana Beach. Time with my daughter and friends, a little fun shopping on eclectic Cedros Avenue or Fashion Valley for my fashion fix. Tacos or gourmet burgers for lunch, cocktails and sunset with friends, and feet up with an on-demand movie and popcorn at home.

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Lisa Deaderick



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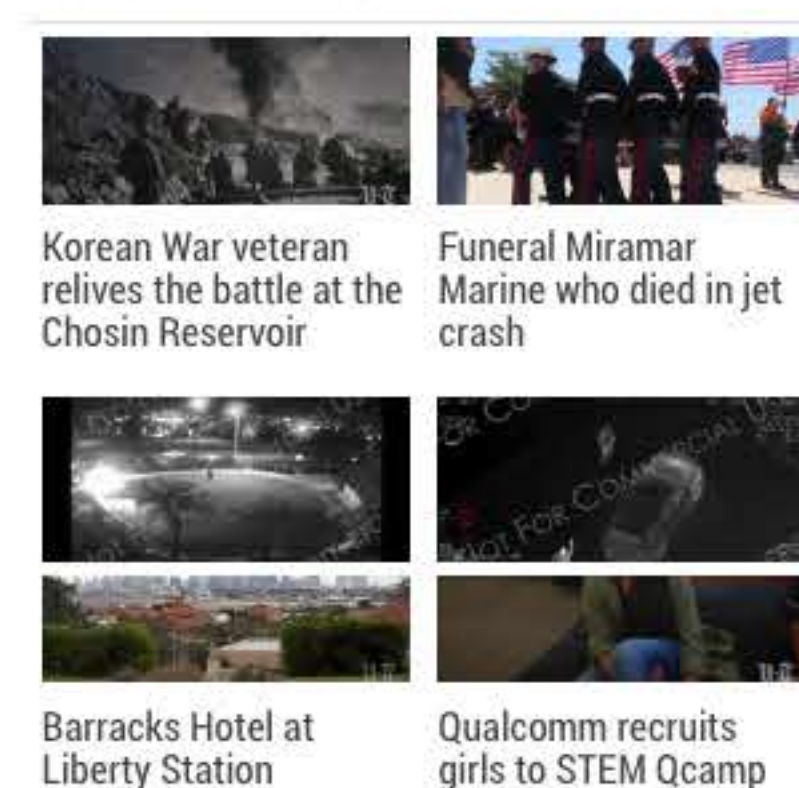
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