

Lohmann: For Nick Kafantaris, the man who made Joe's Inn what it is, a final trip home to Greece

As his father underwent treatment for leukemia, Michael Kafantaris broached an uncomfortable subject:

What did he have in mind as far as a final resting place?

His father, Nick Kafantaris, the man who made Joe's Inn what it is, said he didn't care. Spread his ashes on the Byrd Park VITA Course, which he walked every day, he said.

No, Michael said.

"First, I think that's illegal," he said, "and second, I'm absolutely not going to take you to the VITA Course."

Then Michael had an idea: what about the little mountain village in northern Greece where Nick and his restaurateur sister, Stella Dikos, as children, spent a summer of wonderment and joy, an all-too-brief interlude of happiness in an otherwise sad and dreary childhood. Decades later, Nick and Stella still talked about that summer, the memories as warm and vivid as ever. In recent years, Nick had taken Michael to visit the village, Paraskevi.

Nick scoffed at the idea: "It's too far, it's too expensive. You don't need to do that."

But the words of the stubborn old Greek belied what his face said.

He smiled.

"I knew 100% when he smiled," Michael recalled. "I just knew that was the place he wanted to go."

And after some time Nick acknowledged that, well, yes, "That would be nice."

So, when Nick Kafantaris died in November 2020 at age 76, Michael knew what he and his Aunt Stella had to do. But carrying out their mission proved a challenge because of the pandemic and other logistical conflicts that arose, but, finally, over this past summer, almost two years later, the trip finally happened, and Michael and Stella took Nick home.

When I profiled Nick Kafantaris for the Richmond Times-Dispatch ("No Ordinary Joe," April 7, 1996), he was recovering from surgery to remove a benign tumor from his brain. I asked him what was the first thing he did after he awoke, groggily, from surgery.

Multiplication, he said.

"I just wanted to see if my brain still worked," he said.

During the course of several interviews for that story, Kafantaris recounted how difficult his childhood had been. His mother died when he was 2; his sister, Stella, was not quite 4. Their father, a tailor, did the best he could, but it wasn't enough to lift the family out of poverty. They lived in a one-room stone house with a grandmother. There was almost no money and little food.

"You can't imagine hunger," Kafantaris said. "You have to feel it. You have to go to bed with no food."

Kafantaris dreamed of leaving his hometown, Trikala, a four-hour drive northwest of Athens, getting out into the world and making something of himself. Stella left first, coming to the United States in 1962 to join her new husband, Stavros

Dikos, who was already in Richmond, operating The Village Café on West Grace Street.

Nick did a stint in the Greek military, then the Merchant Marine service and, on a stop in 1967, found himself in New Orleans, and he phoned Stella, whom he hadn't seen since she left Greece.

"I want to see you," he said.

"Do you have any idea how far that is from Richmond?" Stella replied, retelling the episode with a laugh. "Poor thing, he couldn't comprehend how big this country is."

So, Stavros flew to New Orleans and fetched Nick back to Richmond. He stayed 24 hours, and then they put him on a plane back to New Orleans. Short visit or not, Nick knew this is where he wanted to be, and he told Stella he intended to jump ship and come back to Richmond. She told him, don't do it. She said, finish your obligations to the shipping outfit and then she would take care of things and bring him back to the United States legally.

"It was the *only* time my brother listened to me," she said with a laugh. "Never again."

Stella kept her promise, sponsoring Nick's return to the United States in 1970. He worked at The Village and found other restaurant jobs, and eventually purchased Joe's Inn, on North Shields Avenue, in the Fan. It was a narrow place: booths on one side, Formica-topped bar on the other, a sliver of a kitchen behind the wall where Kafantaris would cook seven days a week, 18 hours a day. He kept a cot nearby to catch quick naps.

When he closed on the purchase, he recalled, a lawyer asked him how much operating capital he had.

“What’s operating capital?” he replied.

His “operating capital,” he recalled in the 1996 article, turned out to be about \$35 in pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters scavenged from beneath sofa cushions and his children’s piggybanks.

In 1980, he bought the restaurant next door, knocked out the wall and more than doubled the size of Joe’s. At one point, he thought about renaming Joe’s Inn, but when he went to City Hall to make the change, he discovered he couldn’t afford to. Fate, he said years later, was looking out for him. Changing the name “would have been the single biggest mistake I could have made.”

Kafantaris retired from the restaurant in 1998, but never really left. He lived upstairs and ate all his meals at Joe’s and saw his friends there, said his daughter Tina, who owns Joe’s now. He kept himself busy running errands for the business and “telling us how we were doing everything wrong,” Tina wrote in an email, quickly adding, “I say this lovingly.”

“He loved the place so much he could not quit, no matter what,” she said.

In the 1996 interview, Kafantaris said that after surviving the early rocky times, “Every single day, it got better. We never looked back.”

But from time to time, he and Stella did look back — way back — when they reminisced about the carefree summer they spent as children with relatives in the village now known as Paraskevi. It was 1953, the year Stella turned 11 and Nick turned 9, and it proved to be a welcome respite from their lives in Trikala.

“We had a very hard childhood,” Stella said, and that summer “was so different.”

The village was a place they knew — their maternal grandparents had lived there — but hadn’t visited in years, Stella said, because their father couldn’t send them.

Paraskevi, built on a steep hill above the Haliacmon River, is little more than 30 miles north of Trikala, but it took some doing to get there. They took a train to a point, Stella recalled, then went the rest of the way on foot or horseback.

Once there, it was a different world for the siblings.

Stella remembers going into the forest to gather wood with her grandmother, who taught her how to bundle and carry it back along a rocky path home. Her grandmother taught her how to pick wild greens and wild fruits and how to make spanakopita. She recalled playing on the boulders in the crystal-clear river while their grandmother did laundry.

People were friendly and hospitable. There were community meals and music, singing and dancing.

“Those are the memories that stood out for us,” said Stella, now 80 and mostly retired, though she still works part time for the market on Lafayette Street that bears her name, Stella’s Grocery.

“Being with friends and neighbors who were including us. Very fond memories, and we didn’t get very many.”

Nick talked about that picturesque little village and that summer his whole life, Michael said.

“They ran, they played games,” he said, recalling stories of that summer his father and aunt told him. “It was definitely a

departure from Trikala, which is more of a city and a hustle every day. They went to school, then went to their father's shop and had these chores to do. Just hustle all the time. But when they were [in Paraskevi], they felt free to be kids."

Last August, Michael took Nick's ashes and met Stella in Athens, where she had traveled for a wine tour. They went to Trikala, the old hometown, then up to Paraskevi, a mostly pleasant drive except for a mountainous stretch of white-knuckle driving on the skinny, twisting road — the kind of road where if you're going up and a truck is coming down, you might have to back up a kilometer or more to find a turnout so you can move over and let the truck pass.

"But we did not have to go backwards, thanks to all of the gods and angels and my dad looking out for us," Michael said with a laugh. "We had no issues, no accidents, no problems. Everyone was very nice. When anybody drives near someone that's clearly from another country, they know."

Paraskevi, a village of perhaps 100 full-time inhabitants or so, is "gorgeous," Michael said. Little stone houses with gardens in the front. There were flowers and baskets of mountain herbs. An ornate church, constructed hundreds of years ago by traveling stone masons, anchors the village, which was enhanced by the aroma of baking bread.

Once there, Michael and Stella went to the outdoor plaza, a dining spot and generally the village's gathering place. Within a few minutes, their visit changed in a dramatic and unexpected way.

"We were sitting there, and this gentleman comes over and says, 'Welcome to the village,'" Michael said. "Stella starts

telling him her name, and he points and says, 'Your second cousin is sitting there.'"

The cousin comes over and tells Stella that Stavros' nephew was sitting on the hill. He comes down, and, as Michael said, "Next thing you know, we have about eight people gathered around the table. Everyone knows Stella, and everybody knows the story."

It turns out that Stella knew the relatives from many years ago, but had not kept up with them. They own their homes in the village, Michael said, but live in the United States and return to Paraskevi for only a couple of weeks every summer. Michael and Stella just happened to hit the right time to visit.

"It was unreal," said Michael, who left Joe's in 2010 and is a partner in Rudy's Exotic Mushrooms and Produce. "What are the odds?"

The plan had been to spread Nick's ashes on a mountainside overlooking the valley below that Stella had described as a beautiful spot.

No, no, said the newfound relatives. His ashes should go with all of his extended family in a mausoleum, a small stone building with a terracotta roof, at the local cemetery. They said they would arrange for a box and a plaque that will bear his name and picture, just like the others memorialized there.

"He's going to be here with all of his relatives," they told Michael and Stella, "and it's a place for you guys to come back and see him in the future."

The whole thing was "beautiful," Michael said. "Stella was crying, I was crying."

When they return to Paraskevi, Michael and Stella can also visit a little spruce tree they planted near the river, surrounded with white river stones, in Nick's memory.

The trip proved to be more than Michael imagined. He had envisioned motoring up the mountain switchbacks in the little rented, stick-shift Suzuki and finding a "ghost town." Instead, they wandered into something akin to old home week.

Stella found it all "very touching" the way the trip worked out. Michael described it as "serendipitous."

"It seemed right," he said.