

uscTrojan

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FAMILY



First Lady of Troy

*Niki C. Nikias makes USC
a home away from home
for the Trojan Family.*



FIRST LADY — of — TROY

MEET NIKI C. NIKIAS, THE USC PRESIDENT'S STEADFAST PARTNER,
WHO MAKES A TOP RESEARCH UNIVERSITY FEEL LIKE A HOME AWAY FROM
HOME FOR THE ENTIRE TROJAN FAMILY.

BY CRISTY LYTAL | PHOTOS BY MARK BERNDT

TALK ABOUT AN EARLY HOUSEWARMING.

The day after moving into the USC president's home in San Marino, first lady Niki C. Nikias opened its doors to more than 250 students for Thanksgiving dinner.

"It's in the Greek culture," says Niki, in a lilting Greek accent like that of her husband, C. L. Max Nikias. "You open up your house to a lot of people."

The elegant, understated home exudes warmth, comfort and fun. You can see it in the occasional pop of paisley wallpaper,

cardinal-and-gold throw pillows or arrangement of homegrown roses. Dusty, the Nikiases' 13-year-old tortoiseshell cat, purrs on the sofa next to the first lady.

As Niki recalls her and Max's Thanksgiving party – now an annual event – her blue eyes sparkle and her smile grows wider. "Max and I, being parents, feel like all these kids are our kids," she says. "It was beautiful to see the students filling their plates and coming up to us and saying, 'Oh, thank you. It was so great, so delicious.'"

The couple began the Trojan Thanksgiving tradition so that students too far from home to travel could enjoy the holiday.

Tiffany Chen, a senior architecture major from Yorktown Heights, N.Y., who attended the party, says that she usually doesn't travel home for the holiday, as it is so close to winter break. "Being able to have a home-away-from-home Thanksgiving dinner truly captured the essence of the Trojan Family," she says. "The entire evening was filled with a welcoming atmosphere."

Niki personally understands the value of such hospitality. "Max and I came to the United States as students," she explains. "And we always noticed that, on Thanksgiving, everything was closed, and people would be spending time with their families. So it felt kind of lonely."

It's been a long time since the Nikiases had nowhere to go on Thanksgiving – or on any other night, for that matter. During the first year of Max's presidency, the first lady opened their home to more than 3,000 guests, hosted or attended 254 events, and spent 63 days traveling to destinations including India, China, Hong Kong and Israel to extend the university's global reach.

"To me, my role as a first lady is very simple: supporting my husband and promoting USC through all its constituents and all the organized events," she says. "There's so much to be accomplished, and this \$6 billion fundraising campaign that Max has announced is the key to how we want to bring USC to the next level. So we are really focused on that, and it takes a lot of our time."

University Professor Kevin Starr points to some less tangible aspects of the role. "First ladies project the values of the university, and Niki is projecting something of USC's upscale dimension – in the sense of an ambition to do things better, to make the world a better place," he says. "She exudes empathy, optimism and panache."

As a young girl in Cyprus, Niki Djionis began developing the tireless work ethic that eventually would serve her well as the first lady of one of the world's most dynamic, global universities.

"Both Max and I were very fortunate," she says. "Our parents started from having nothing, and they built their own small businesses. Max's father was a carpenter, and he opened up his own workshop. My father was a clearing agent for importing goods in Cyprus. So we come from families who were very loving and very business-successful."

The Nikiases first met as teenagers, before either of them was allowed to date. After graduating from the same gymnasium – the European equivalent of a college-preparatory U.S. high school – in their hometown of Famagusta, both went to Athens to pursue undergraduate studies. There, they began dating and soon were engaged.

"Since we liked each other so much, we had to let our parents know that we were serious about it," she says, laughing. "We've been together for a very long time. It's very unusual, I think, to be able to go through all these changes and experiences. People change, but we have that bond, so we keep helping each other to move forward. It's been teamwork all these years."

While her husband was studying electrical and mechanical engineering at the National Technical University of Athens, Niki was getting her bachelor's degree from the Athens University of Economics and Business. Afterward, she worked as an accountant in Greece, the United Kingdom and the United States. Meanwhile, the future president of USC, after studying for a brief time in the U.K., earned a scholarship to attend graduate school at the State

University of New York at Buffalo (SUNY-Buffalo) in 1979.

Niki quickly embraced life in the United States, earning her master's degree in business administration with a specialization in finance from SUNY-Buffalo. By poetic coincidence, both her and Max's diplomas were signed by then-SUNY-Buffalo president Steven Sample, who became president of USC in 1991. That's the same year the Nikiases joined the Trojan Family, with Max beginning his successful USC career as a professor at the Viterbi School of Engineering.

"It's only here in America where you come and you work hard and you succeed to achieve your goals," says Niki. "I mean, who would have dreamed that Max would be a president? It's been a great journey."

The Nikiases have two daughters, Georgiana and Maria. Until they finished high school, Niki made motherhood her top priority, even if it meant that she couldn't attend every single university event. The family lived on the Palos Verdes Peninsula, 30 miles from the university. Still, both girls ended up studying at USC. Georgiana earned a bachelor's in English and archaeology in 2007 and a J.D. from the USC Gould School of

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NIKI C. NIKIAS in the library of the USC president's home, where she hosted 130 events during her first two years as first lady

Law in 2011. She also received a master's in world archaeology from Oxford University in 2008. Maria finished her bachelor's in broadcast journalism, with a minor in entrepreneurship, in 2011. Niki's deep devotion to her daughters impressed trustee, alumnus and donor Verna B. Dauterive from the moment of their introduction.

"I first met Niki in Hawaii in 2005, shortly after Max became our new provost," says Dauterive, whom the first lady considers a role model and mentor. "We were in the same hotel for the football game. She put one arm around me and one arm around her younger daughter, who was in high school then. And Niki's warm smile, and just the way she introduced her daughter to me, really made a profound statement about her as a mother, a wife and a lady of grace."

Once the children were enrolled at USC, Niki poured all of her energy and focus into the larger Trojan Family.

"I don't think I realized what the Trojan Family means until I started spending more time at USC and getting involved with the different aspects of the university," she says. "Then I realized that it's like my own family,

except that it's bigger."

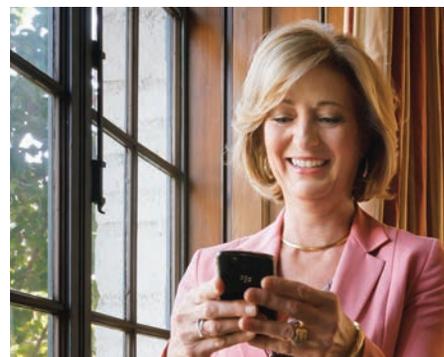
As first lady, she has entertained everyone from Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to former USC first lady Lucy Hubbard Haugh.

The two first ladies had a few private lunches in the president's home. "I told Niki I thought she ought to keep a diary," Hubbard Haugh recalls. That's the only advice I gave her."

Why a diary? "Because you can't remember all these good things that happen when you're first lady. Things come along so rapidly that you have no time to anticipate, no time to savor and no time to reflect. It is just one wonderful experience after another," Hubbard Haugh explains.

Of course, many experiences have left such an impression that Niki doesn't need a diary to remember them. Like March 1, when she took the stage at Bovard Auditorium to deliver an inspirational speech to more than 900 Trojan alumnae, friends and family at the largest Women's Conference in the university's history.

She played a quieter but equally pivotal role at a dinner for faculty and staff who had contributed at least 1 percent of their salaries to the USC Good Neighbors Cam-



THE FIRST LADY AT WORK FOR THE TROJAN FAMILY: Top, at home in San Marino; above, addressing the largest Women's Conference in USC history.



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paign (GNC), which supports programs that strengthen the local community.

“Niki was very involved in planning the dinner, and it was really an amazing event,” says top GNC donor John Wolcott, senior computer consultant in the USC Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy. “One of the main attractions at the dinner, besides the food, was Greek dancing. The neat thing about Max and Niki is that they’re really fun people. They’re open to new ideas and running with a good one and seeing where it goes.”

Of the roughly 130 events the Nikiases have hosted during their first two years at the president’s home, highlights have included holiday parties for faculty, staff, student leaders, donors and the USC football team. The couple increased the number of these gatherings from six to nine during their first year and to 11 during their second year.

One holiday guest, USC star quarterback Matt Barkley, says, “I sat next to [Niki] at the banquet, and we pretty much talked the whole night about traveling, Europe, and academics and other things.” He adds, “It’s always fun to talk to her, because of the way she conducts herself – very gracious, very

welcoming and warm.” At Niki’s insistence, Barkley and his teammates were served by waiters instead of dining buffet-style.

The first lady may not know the difference between a nose tackle and a punter, but it’s clear, says athletic director Pat Haden, that “she really appreciates what the football game means to the Trojan Family.” He adds: “She’s embraced that. She comes to all the games, home and away.”

Luckily, Niki is a hardy traveler. Trustee, alumnus and donor John Mork, who recently walked through the old city of Jerusalem with her during an official university visit to Israel, described her as “a toughie.”

“I’ve been on arduous, long things with her – travel and miserable 14-hour days,” he says. “She can hang in there with you. There’s this warmth and calmness about her. When the whole world is spinning, she’s there going, ‘Oh, don’t worry. We’ve got this.’”

Gayle Roski, alumna and namesake of the USC Roski School of Fine Arts, likes the way the Nikiases energize each other. Traveling with a 2011 university delegation to India, Roski recalls feeling exhausted. “And I saw Max and Niki going 24 hours a day, together, hand in hand,” she says. “I love that

about them. I’m always seeing Max pick up her hand, and I see how much she means to his life.”

At home, Niki also enjoys entertaining on a smaller scale. She has invited USC trustees to stay overnight in the guest suite. Among the first of these visitors were Dana and David Dornsife, who donated \$200 million to the university in 2011.

“Niki is one of my favorite people,” says David Dornsife. “We enjoy talking to the Nikiases, so a lot of times we’ll arrive early to an event. That gives us a little bit of a chance to talk to her before the guests come in.”

Through her warmth and dedication, Niki makes a large, world-class research university feel like a home away from home for the entire Trojan Family.

Friends wonder how the first lady copes with having so little time alone with her husband anymore. Niki just laughs. “Max loves what he’s doing, and I love seeing him being happy. So that’s how we feel. We don’t see it as a job. With USC, it’s a commitment. It’s like your family.” ●

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