

Pittsburgh Boomers

May 2007

Pittsburgh TV Personality Also Overseeing New Highmark Initiative

By John Fries

If you've watched WQED-TV Channel 13 over the past several years, you've seen Kweilin Nassar. She's the petite, dark-haired woman who appears during fundraising pledge breaks, describing the benefits of public television and asking viewers to call and make pledges of support to the station.

While most members of the general public today know Nassar primarily from her frequent appearances on WQED, the fact is she's been a major figure in local broadcasting and community relations for the past 30 years. Her multi-page resume reveals a long list of professional accomplishments in not only public television, but also commercial TV and radio. And, last summer, she was named director of Highmark Healthy High 5, an initiative of the Highmark Foundation, which was launched in September. Highmark Healthy High 5 seeks to address serious health and social needs among children in the 49 counties served by Highmark across Pennsylvania.

But it all started in Fayette County. "My parents lived in Star Junction," says Nassar. "My grandparents came to the U.S. from Syria and Lebanon; in fact, on my mother's side, we can trace our lineage back to 500 B.C. in Syria. Our family tree is written in Arabic, and is laid out in a half-moon shape. Interestingly, most of the names on it are of the males." Among those to whom she is related are the Monsour family in Westmoreland County and the Maloof family, owners of the famed Palms Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. When she was two, she and her mother moved to Homewood to live with her aunt. Nassar grew up there and attended Homewood Elementary School. Nassar recalls that her family was always active in the Antiochian Orthodox Church, where they were (and are) members, and in the local Middle Eastern community.

When you spend a considerable amount of time with people of Syrian and/or Lebanese heritage, you quickly learn four things: the people are warm, friendly, and gregarious; their families are close-knit; the food is delicious and belly dancing is truly an art form.

"I was dancing ever since I could stand up," explains Nassar. "In Middle Eastern households, everyone dances; it's an expression of joy. My grandmother, my mother and my mother's sister were all very good dancers." A turning point occurred when she was 16. "I watched a very skilled belly dancer from Morocco dance on three champagne glasses, and, at that point, decided to pursue it more fully," she recalls. "My cousin, Bobby Farrah, was one of the best Middle Eastern dancers anywhere. He helped me refine my dancing." Dancing was always an enjoyable avocation for Nassar; she even danced professionally for a while at the Mediterranean restaurant, which was owned by the daughter of the late Joe Budway, a local musician of Middle Eastern heritage and uncle of jazz pianist David and singer Maureen. At the restaurant, Nassar danced while Middle Eastern and Greek musicians played and their friends congregated. It was a great time in a fun-filled, party atmosphere.

Nassar's career was also going well. She was working in Pittsburgh's industrial sector during the early 70's, when she was offered a position as program coordinator at WWSW, then a beautiful music station known to listeners as "double-double." The station's FM side, under the leadership of teenage program director Bob Pittman (who would later play a key role in creating MTV), had just switched its call letters to WPEZ and its format from organ music to top-40 rock.

Three years later, she accepted a position at KDKA-TV, just across the Allegheny River from WWSW's North Side studios. "I started working in the public service area," she says. "This was when Westinghouse Broadcasting owned the station; it was the premier broadcasting company at the time and revered in the industry. During the ten years I spent there, I built the station's community relations department. I also started on the air there in 1976."

Viewers will remember Nassar's appearances on the station's public service spots. However, she was much busier behind the scenes, and many of the initiatives she led were honored with awards. Among her many efforts, she recalls "starting KD's Army and establishing Second Chance first national organ donation and transplant project. KDKA's current For Kids' Sake program was modeled after that." While at KDKA, she also had an opportunity to bring attention to the Orthodox Christian Church. "The Council of Eastern Orthodox Youth Leaders of America (CEOYLA) held its third PanOrthodox Vespers at Mellon Arena," she says. "It was the largest Orthodox event in the country and featured a 250-member choir. We taped the Vespers service, edited and packaged it immediately, then aired it an hour later."

By 1986, Nassar was working at Pittsburgh public relations firm Mangus, Catanzano and Skaare and, later, freelanced for Group W Productions. She then moved into public broadcasting, working in promotions and corporate support at WQEX-TV and WQED-FM. She also handled special projects for WQED's then-president; eventually served as director of community affairs; and began to spend considerable time on camera hosting such programs as Health Talk, a weekly half-hour sponsored by then-Shadyside Hospital on which she interviewed physicians and other medical professionals. When WQED's ON Q was launched, Nassar was a contributor covering the religion and ethnicity beat.

"I also started doing on-camera work at night during pledge drives in addition to my day jobs behind the scenes," she recalls--something she continues to do today. As you might imagine, a person in her position gets to meet and work with many interesting people. "When the movie Bob Roberts was being filmed in Pittsburgh, director and star Tim Robbins and his crew were working out of the WQED studios," she says. When interviewing him on-camera she remembers that, "he was so tall that I had to stand on a box--and I was still too short." She's also worked with a wide variety of musicians, including Jim Brickman and John Tesh. She says she was "awestruck and speechless" around singer Patti Page, and, recently, was "impressed with the politeness and down-to-earth manner" of young Italian crooner Patrizio.

And then, there was the owl. "The National Aviary staff brought two owls to the studio," she says. "One was only about eight inches tall. The other was a little larger, and it kept watching me with its big eyes. Then, it spread its wings. It had a six-foot wingspan that whacked the top of my head."

Eventually, Nassar returned to full-time administrative work by day, spending two years as development director at the Carnegie Science Center before being named executive director of the River City Brass Band.

Today, she's thrilled to be leading a Highmark Foundation initiative that's projected to touch the lives of a million children over the next five years. "Highmark Healthy High 5 is focused in five areas--nutrition, physical activity, grieving, self-esteem and bullying," she says. "Health experts have told us that the next generation will live sicker and die younger than the generation before. Recognizing the serious needs that exist, the Highmark Foundation is making a substantial investment in the health and social needs of children in our service area. Last September, we introduced a five-year, \$100 million program to address the needs of children's health in these five critical areas. Physical activity and nutrition address the serious health threat of childhood obesity."

The Highmark Healthy High 5 program is also addressing emotional needs, which affect a child's overall well being. The Highmark Caring Place provides programs to help children deal with grief issues that are unique to their age group. Children grieve differently than adults," says Nassar. Other programs include those on self-esteem and bullying. "Bullying is one of the hottest issues for educators today," says Nassar. "And, one that needs to be dealt with effectively. In the past, bullying primarily took place in the schoolyard. Today, there's also cyber-bullying through text messaging and on such Web sites as YouTube." She notes that an estimated 160,000 children don't go to school so they can avoid bullying. "This can lead to depression and even suicide, so it's important that we address it." Nassar says her work at Highmark is "one of the highlights of my career. We're looking to make a difference."

While Nassar has received numerous honors throughout her career, a few stand out for personal reasons. "I received the Antonian Silver Medal, the second highest award of the Antiochian Archdiocese, and two meritorious service awards. The meritorious service awards were for public relations for the church and the other for cultural activities." Although she's highly recognizable in the Pittsburgh area for her media work, she says she's known nationally for Middle Eastern folk dancing. "I choreographed and co-directed two Middle Eastern folklore concerts at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Music Hall," she says. "And then, we were invited to do the concert at the Kennedy Center for the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese national convention when our patriarch was visiting. We had an ensemble of about 25 dancers, 10 musicians and a singer."

She says she's also very honored to be the first Arab-American to serve as a member of Pennsylvania's Human Relations Commission. The commission's 11 members, each of whom was recommended for his or her position by an elected official, are assigned (as panels of three members each) to adjudicate in situations governed by the state's Human Relations Act. These can include employment, sexual harassment, housing issues, hate crimes and other problems. Responsibilities include establishing a strong familiarity with--then executing judgement based on--the Human Relations Act. She notes that reading the entire testimony of each case for which they must render judgement is time consuming, but necessary.

For many years, Nassar has voluntarily contributed her skills and expertise to the Orthodox Church. At one point, she handled public relations for conventions and other events. About nine years ago, along with the Very Rev. John Abdalah, dean of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral in Oakland (Nassar's longtime parish) and several other

communications professionals who are members of the Orthodox Christian faith, she founded the local Orthodox Christian Communications Committee. Last fall, the committee, which functions as the communications arm of the Orthodox Clergy Brotherhood, debuted a weekly television program called Orthodoxy Now on which members of the Orthodox clergy and lay community are interviewed on a variety of topics. Nassar volunteers as on-camera co-host and interviewer, and behind the scenes, serves as one of the program's producers. The program airs twice a day, seven days a week in the city of Pittsburgh on Christian Associates' channel 95. It's also available at any time on Comcast On-Demand.

With her work responsibilities and volunteer activities, Nassar has little time for fun and relaxation. And, she says she doesn't dance as regularly as she used to. But she has two favorite activities reserved for her "unwind" time: karaoke singing, which she and her family do together, and shopping.

John Fries

2637 Brighton Road

Pittsburgh, PA 15212

Phone: 412.760.2299

E-Mail: johnfries@comcast.net

Web: www.johnfries.com