

# LOOKING TOWARDS OUR CENTENNIAL

## *A Myriad of Annunciation Memories*

*By Julie Mamalis*

Little Juliette Marie (Marika) George arrived in Sacramento in 1945. Her family migrated to California from Oklahoma at the urging of an uncle who happened to be stationed at that time with the U.S. Navy at Treasure Island. He excitedly proclaimed to his sister, my mother, Hope/Despina, that California was the most beautiful place he had ever seen! He was successful in convincing us to move to his newly-found paradise, and, thus, our family history at Sacramento Annunciation took root.

“Little Juliette (Marika)”, of course, was me...Julie Mamalis. Family at that time consisted of my parents, my baby sister Helen, and my maternal grandparents, Yianni and Julia Smyrni (Smyrnioudis), immigrants of Chios, Greece, who lived with us. I’m not quite sure what drew us to Sacramento - my guess is that the large Cretan communities of nearby Lodi, Stockton and Modesto, where my paternal grandmother had distant Cretan relatives, was the reason. I can recall large, outdoor gatherings at the Dimotakis ranch in Lodi where we often joined those Cretans on special occasions. That paternal “Yiayia”, Maria Hatzegeorgiou, (my father Foteos’ mother) was a native of Chania, Crete, who often stayed with us, too....a common practice at that time, when grandparents lived with their children.

Life was pretty simple then.....work, school and church, with not many other distractions. Although I was very young, I can remember the old church at 620 N Street. An old, faded photo I treasure shows me in a grouping of little girls adorned in long white dresses and sporting “angel wings”, surrounding the altar of that long-ago church. I still recall the booming, chanting voice of Peter Mamalis, the “mainstay psalti” of Annunciation who faithfully served in that capacity for nearly 50 years. Little did I know at that time that he would become my father-in-law when I married his son, Jim, in 1961! Peter’s daughter, my sister-in-law Soteria, married John Mestakidis, the son of Fr. George Mestakidis, who was the priest at Annunciation during the 40’s. Fr. Mestakidis was a vegetarian, way before it was “trendy”, who would visit my grandfather’s farm in Carmichael to stock up on fresh vegetables.

Church picnics were the popular social gatherings of that era, where the immigrant parishioners shared their ethnic and religious customs. Live Greek music, lambs on the spit, religious services and us children frolicking together, leave treasured memories. We, the first and second generations of those steadfast immigrants, appreciate their contributions in providing us such lasting memories!

I lovingly remember my devout maternal grandfather who instilled in me the importance of Holy Communion. Before leaving for church and taking communion, he would say to me: “sihorese me ke o Theos tha se horesi” - “forgive me and God will forgive you”. He would then have me recite the same to him. That ritual made communion so meaningful and links me to him whenever I receive communion. He was left blind by Glaucoma at an early age (there was no cure in those years). I remember how he gently touched the faces of us grandchildren, to feel the outlines of our faces that he could not see.

Annunciation’s move to Alhambra Boulevard began a new era. There, we grew as a church community, where we created myriads of memories and lasting friendships. Although we went to public schools and developed friendships with “Americani”, our lives revolved mainly around “the church across the street from McKinley Park, with the beautiful stained glass windows”. Being a member of the church and belonging to both religious and fraternal organizations provided me with an abundance of nostalgia that I fondly cling to. My strict Greek father even approved of my participation in these church activities!

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In those early years, the church choir not only provided a service, but was also the major socializing channel for Greek youth and teenagers – GOYA came along later. Many lifelong friendships were formed through this affiliation. Our choir participated in a yearly “choir conference” that took us to other church communities throughout our diocese, and sometimes even other dioceses. The Annunciation Choir hosted several of those conferences. At the tender age of 12, I was “thrust” into the role of church organist, where I remained for the next 25 years, accompanying the choir and playing for innumerable weddings!

When GOYA was formed, a new era of youth involvement and activities emerged. Our aging scrapbooks, full of faded photos and lingering memories, provide a historical documentation of our youth in the early Annunciation years. Eventually, an even larger youth movement was formed when, in 1976, the San Francisco Diocese created FDF – the annual Greek Folk Dance Festival. With the guidance and leadership of Presvytera Ellie Dogias, Annunciation joined the movement in 1980, forming many award-winning dance groups that created a legacy in our church community. As many as six groups, boasting well over 100 dancers, have represented Annunciation every year since 1980!

Among my fondest memories are the beauty and reverence of our Annunciation Orthodox Easter services. Those passionate services left lasting images in my impressionable young mind. As the church was bedecked with palms, Palm Sunday services ushered in the beginning of Holy Week, as we anticipated the week that was to follow. I was in awe of the flower-bedecked “epitaphio” as we joined in the singing of the beautiful hymns of Good Friday, which left me both happy and sad. I felt so mature, holding a flickering candle as I processed around the block with my family and the congregation. As a young child, I was so excited to sing out Christos Anesti at the stroke of midnight of Anasti, while the church gradually became illuminated from the sharing of the altar candle! I still look forward to re-living the beautiful commemoration of Pascha, and, as an adult, I now participate in the meaningful 40 days leading to that great event!

As we know, all good Greek children must attend Greek School. In my youth, the classes took place in the upstairs room of the old Hellenic Center, with the memorable “small-doored-projector-hole”, an opening where the old-time projector would transmit images down to a screen in the hall. The room’s back stairs allowed sometime-tardy students to sneak into the class unseen. My Greek School teacher was also a chanter.....an animated gentleman with a volatile personality! When the kindly Fr. Parthenios Kirmitsis was later assigned to Annunciation, he also became the Greek School teacher. Since he lived in my River Park neighborhood, he would drive my sister and I to class (mine was a working mom). That upstairs classroom transformed itself many times, it’s final life serving as the storage closet for hundreds of Greek dance costumes!

I fondly remember Solander’s....the “early mini-mart” owned by the Scandivian Solander family at the corner of Alhambra and F Streets (where the two-story office building now stands). As teenagers, it was our hangout where we could buy sodas and snacks and linger to be with our friends. Mr. and Mrs. Solander always greeted us Greek kids with a treat and a smile!

My children and grandchildren also grew up in this wonderful Annunciation church community. They created and treasure their own fond memories. I look forward to great grandchildren who will continue our lineage and have the opportunity to follow in their ancestors’ footsteps which were laid before them.

## SIDE NOTE:

As I was writing this article, the beautiful (online) chanting of “Oti me thimon o Theos” appeared on my cell-phone. It was March 24, when we were all quarantined because of the Corona Virus.....the eve of our beloved Annunciation’s nameday. How fitting that I was able to “participate” in the beautiful service, mesmerized by hauntingly-beautiful chanting, as I continued with my loving recollections of Annunciation!