

SANTA MONICA Spotlight

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Nat and Ida Trives

Leadership runs in the family




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'Mr. Santa Monica' — and his accomplished family

Generations of leadership from Nat, Ida and Toni Trives

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Nat and Ida Trives

Nat Trives has been called Mr. Santa Monica, and it's well deserved. "I believe the most rewarding service is volunteerism," he says, and he's been a leader in the city for over 5 decades, in government, public safety, education and civic life.

All over town, you'll see Nat's influence: from his years in law enforcement, as Santa Monica mayor and City Council member, professor of political science and criminal justice at Santa Monica College, and on a dizzying number of boards in education, health care, public service and social justice. His resume of awards and commendations fills two full, single-spaced pages.

Even retirement in 1997 didn't slow down this spry octogenarian. "My doctors say the only thing keeping me alive is the fact that I'm energized to help others," he says.

But when you talk with him, clearly there's another motivator, his family: Ida, his wife of 66 years, and their daughter, Toni. Both are movers and shakers in their own right, in business, academia and the community, with accomplishments so wide-ranging they could each fill their own article. And they all dote on Toni's two teenage sons, Tristan and Travis.

Plus, this family speaks and acts with such heart, warmth, grace and humor that when you encounter them, it's hard not to find your own spirits lifted.

Ida's early years were in Dayton, Ohio, where her parents worked for a restaurant called the Goody Goody. In 1948, the restaurant moved to Santa Monica, the family came with it, and the eatery was reborn at the corner of Wilshire and Berkeley, as the Goody Goody Drive-in. "Their motto was 'We came 2,000 miles to bring you the world's best apple pie' — and that was my mom's!" says Ida, with a broad smile that defines her. The drive-in became such a local institution that it even appeared in a James Ellroy novel.

In 1953, Ida enrolled at Santa Monica College. That was when fate, luck, or perhaps a little of both, brought her to her future husband. A friend was driving her home from a birthday party and suggested they stop by another party. Other SMC students were there, including a handsome, young Nat.

"We were playing parlor games," Ida recalls, laughing, "and one of them was spin the bottle. Nat spun the bottle, and it came to me. Then I spun the bottle, and it went to him, and it went on like that for half an hour! Everybody else thought we were trying to do that, but it just happened — it's the absolute truth!"

From that moment, they were inseparable. Ida was Nat's date for dinners for the many clubs he belonged to at SMC, and in 1955 they were married at the First Baptist Church in Venice.



Nat with grandsons Tristan (left) and Tanner (right)

Typical of those times, Ida was a homemaker and raised Toni while Nat worked outside the home, but she never forgot her own education, eventually earning an MBA and honor society membership at the University of Redlands, plus an invitation to study at Oxford University.

After a stint in the corporate world, she put her entrepreneurial skills to work. The first company she founded provided training in strategic planning, time management, conflict resolution and cultural sensitivity.

Later, Ida and Nat together founded TLT and Associates, on a simple premise: The eye-catching armored cars used to transfer funds from auto dealerships to banks were a like a magnet for thieves. The Trives took the opposite tack, staffing unmarked cars with plainclothes police. "We did that for 15 years without one incident," Ida says with satisfaction.

"The most rewarding service is volunteerism."

As busy as she was with work and motherhood, Ida found time to volunteer with dozens of civic organizations in Santa Monica, including the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Legal Aid Society and YWCA. "I also helped co-found Santa Monica Gems," she says, "whose mission is to recognize Black students in Santa Monica schools and provide college scholarships for graduating seniors."

Coincidentally, Nat also spent his early days in Ohio, near Cincinnati. His family moved to Santa Monica when Nat was 14 years old, for his father's work in commercial real estate.

Nat enjoyed school and playing football, basketball and volleyball, but he focused on student government. He was elected to numerous class presidencies and Associated Student Body (ASB) cabinet, culminating in his election as ASB president at Santa Monica High School in 1952.

At SMC, he became the first president of the Alpha class (when SMC moved to its current location) and rose to vice president of the entire ASB. The clock tower the ASB had built the campus remains a legacy of that time. "it symbolizes the fact that education is timeless," Nat says proudly.

After completing his education at Cal State LA, Nat served in the Santa Monica Police Department for over a decade, rose to the rank of sergeant and spent 5 years as president of the Santa Monica Police Officers Association. And he did it all with courtesy and kindness even during potentially uncomfortable situations like traffic stops. "I was always pleasant and courteous to the drivers," he recalls, "generally disarming any hostility that might exist." Even after receiving costly tickets, some drivers would actually thank him!

That law enforcement experience proved so valuable that in 1969 Nat was asked to join the faculties of both Cal State LA and SMC, teaching criminal justice and political science. He also became the Cal State system's first affirmative action officer.

And the trailblazing continued. By the early 1970s, Nat was the first African-American elected to the Santa Monica City Council. And, he notes with pride, "I was the top vote-getter both times I ran!"

Serving on the City Council was one thing, but being elected mayor was another. In 1975, just two years after major cities like Los Angeles, Detroit and Atlanta had installed their first African-American mayors, history was also made in Santa Monica when Nat's fellow councilmembers elected him mayor.

He calls his leadership style "always outspoken but not rude," (while joking "my daughter and wife are cracking up!"). His guiding principal: "I don't stand for BS."

Nat's eight years on the City Council saw much of Santa Monica as we know it evolve. Among the bigger projects, park space grew

with Virginia Avenue and Clover Parks, and the Douglas Aircraft Manufacturing plant became Santa Monica Business Park.

"When I became mayor, we streamlined the government," he recalls. He also set about diversifying city government. "I made sure in 1975 that we had a person of color on every board and commission."

Another way he made the city more inclusive: "Soka Gakkai International wanted to come to Santa Monica," Nat says, "but the backlash to bringing this Buddhist organization to the city was unbelievably negative. I got behind it 1,000 percent."

Decades later, SGI remains integral to Santa Monica's fabric, hosting events including the annual Martin Luther King Day celebration, in which Ida and Nat remain deeply involved along with other civic and religious leaders.

Not only that, Soka Gakkai's hometown of Fujinomiya, Japan is now Santa Monica's sister city, alongside Mazatlan, Mexico and Hamm, Germany. Nat chaired the Santa Monica Sister City Association, and Ida was a board member.

By the late 1970s, Nat's reputation for knowledge, integrity and a can-do spirit had spread so wide that he was named a special master and auditor monitor at the US Federal Court for the Northern District of California, in San Francisco. He became one of the first Bay Area commuters, flying up north each week and returning home to Santa Monica for the weekends.

"My students were older than I was."

And then there's Toni. A product of Santa Monica schools (apart from a few years when the family lived in Pasadena), she displayed an early affinity for languages. It was on a family trip to Honolulu that she visited the University of Hawaii and was enthralled with its East West Center, filled with scholars from all over the world. "There were people speaking all of these different languages," she says, "and I thought: 'This is where I want to go.' It ended up being the only place I applied."

"People used to say, 'Kids go to the University of Hawaii and treat it like a playground,'" Ida recalls. "Well, that wasn't true. Toni took it upon herself to take extra classes, got excellent grades and did very well," graduating in three years instead of the usual four.

A doctorate from UCLA followed, in romance linguistics and literature. Her early graduation from college meant that as a teaching assistant, "My students were often older than I was," she remembers.

Her youth notwithstanding, Toni worked her way up the ranks, eventually chairing the Department of Modern Languages and Culture at SMC; she has also taught at Occidental College and Crossroads School.

"For anybody who teaches," she reflects, "it's always good to see what your students have done with their lives. You always think of them as when they were your students, yet they move on and become professionals, and it can be surprising — and very satisfying."

Toni retired as department chair during the Covid era but still serves as part-time faculty, while indulging a passion for gardening. "Everything grows here!" she exclaims.

It's not just produce. "The greatest thing that Toni ever did for us was adopt two little babies," says Nat. "We were planning a cruise one year, and she came in with a picture of this little baby and said, 'This is your grandson.' We didn't think we were going to have grandkids, but it was the greatest blessing that we've had." That baby, Tristan,



Ida and Toni Trives

was three months old, and just like that Ida and Nat were grandparents.

Four years later, Toni was offered to adopt Tristan's newborn, biological brother, Tanner, and she accepted. "We love her for it, and we love them," Nat says.

"It was the greatest blessing."

Now 17 and 13, Tristan and Tanner attend Crossroads School and are into volleyball, flag football and basketball. And they've accompanied Toni on trips to Europe, Asia, Hawaii and across North America.

One last love of the family's life: Santa Monica, both the city overall and their immediate neighborhood.

"I always look out for my neighbors," Nat says, "to the west, to the east, behind me and the 101-year-old across the street."

That comment elicits laughter. "They're all single ladies!" Ida jokes. "If he doesn't see them for a while, he tries to find out if they're okay."

And Toni sums it up. With all this family's accomplishments and adventures, it's actually pretty simple: "I guess Santa Monica means home." ■

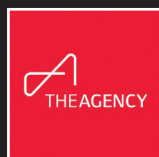


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