MEET GARDEN CITY RESIDENT
DANIELLE LALEHZAR
A True Testament to the Power of Healing Through Friendship and Fundraising

Cover photo by ASHLEY MEDICI
Danielle Gaudio-Lalehzar, the daughter of Bob Gaudio, founding member of the Four Seasons and prolific songwriter and producer, has forged a remarkable path of her own, shaped by both personal tragedy and a profound commitment to helping others. Born into a world of music and creativity, Danielle's life took an unexpected turn when she experienced the devastating loss of her mother at a young age. However, rather than succumbing to despair, Danielle channeled her grief into a powerful force for good, fundraising for causes that have profound meaning to her, such as Empower, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting children who have lost a parent.

Danielle moved to Long Island in 1984 at the age of seventeen. She was the first in her family to go to college. As she describes it, Adelphi University became her new, safe, secure home away from home. Living on campus for four years sparked Danielle's dream of settling in Garden City one day in the future.

Thirty years ago, Danielle was working in a bridal shop selling costume jewelry. A bride-to-be came into the store looking for earrings and Danielle boldly asked her, "Do you have anyone you could set me up with?" That's how Danielle met her husband, Sal. Danielle and Sal have been happily married for twenty-seven years. "He's my biggest supporter in everything I do."

Danielle and Sal's first home was in New Hyde Park. They started their family there and have two sons, Cyrus and Dylan. In 2005, Danielle's dream was fulfilled as the family found their new home in Garden City.

Homestead School provided Cyrus and Dylan with a great foundation. Both had incredible Kindergarten and first grade teachers. The principal of Homestead, Dr. V left a lasting impression on Cyrus and Dylan. Every morning, she greeted every student by their first name, making them feel valued and important and instilling in them the way to build relationships.

Cyrus now volunteers as an assistant basketball coach at Garden City High school and Dylan is in his junior year at Marist college. Sal and Danielle now have the time to travel and are enjoying the new pickleball trend together.

Friendship has always been an integral part of Danielle's life. She's maintained meaningful relationships since childhood with school friends, college friends, work friends, and running friends. As Danielle puts it, "Connecting with people is my strong suit and Garden City makes building new friendships inevitable." Joining the Gourmet Club was how she and Sal met their first neighborhood friends. Movie nights at the Garden City Pool were magical. The kids could spend the entire day roaming around freely, swimming and playing with friends ending the night on the hill watching a movie.

Working in retail also enhanced Danielle's natural flair for connecting with people and building relationships. For ten years, Danielle worked as the gold buyer at Fortunoff. Helene Fortunoff and her Daughters, Esther and Ruth, were powerful role models. Danielle recently served on the Women's Jewelry Association Jury for the
Helene Fortunoff Women in Retail Scholarship. Esther and Ruth are friends and supporters of her philanthropic endeavors.

Danielle found her community with a group of women who were training to run the Ladies Diva half marathon. Every day, the women would meet at St. Paul's at 5:15 am to get their runs in before the kids were up. Training together brought new lasting friendships. They were moms empowering, supporting and inspiring each other. "I could have never done twenty half marathons and one full 26.2 alone. We did it together by encouraging each other. People who sweat together stay together!" is what Danielle often says. One of the biggest accomplishments in Danielle's life has been running the 2011 NYC Marathon. She and 12 other Garden City residents trained together and raised a generous amount of money for Team for Kids.

Danielle lost her mother three weeks before her college graduation to a brief respiratory illness. She was devastated and felt lost and alone. At the time, Danielle didn’t know anyone who had lost their mother. She didn’t want the grief to consume her so before she knew keeping busy and focusing on something was important, she immediately registered for graduate school at Adelphi. She was fortunate enough to enroll in a course called “The Holistic Aspects of Death and Dying.” The course helped her process her grief as it required writing about loss in order to heal.

Danielle treasures her first writing assignment from that class. It was an essay that consisted of a letter to her mother six weeks after she died:

"I will never use your death as an excuse for not getting things accomplished and I know how much of your life you put into mine. My life, your creation, is what you left me to take care of always. You have given me enough love in twenty-two years to last a lifetime, with that love I find the strength to go on. Although a part of me died, I will go on to live my life as best I can. I know that one day when the pain subsides, I will be happy again. I will be happy and I will smile when I think of you."

In 2017, Danielle discovered an organization that resonated with her profoundly, Empower. Empower is an international nonprofit on a mission to empower, support and connect children and young adults up through age 24 who have experienced the loss of a parent. After meeting the founder of Empower, Cara Belvin, Danielle immediately felt the need to raise awareness for children and young adults suffering the loss of a parent.

Danielle became an Ambassador for Empower and started using her passion for planning purposeful events to raise money and honor her mother. It all started with selling 30 bracelets for an Empower pop-up party then having 30 people attend Jersey Boys (tickets were donated and all proceeds were given to support Empower’s expansion.)

In 2020, Danielle went through treatment for breast cancer. She once again found herself in a very challenging time where writing would once again help her heal. The Visible Ink writing program (offered through Memorial Sloan Kettering) provided Danielle with a writing mentor, Karen Zlotnick, who provided guidance and support for Danielle to publish a poem 'Indulge In Joyful Moments'. The poem was published in the 15th Visible Ink Anthology and made Danielle a lyricist. The poem was turned into a song for The Visible Ink's annual production.

Danielle discovered the Adelphi University's Breast Cancer Hotline and Support, which connected her with someone to talk to. Angela Papalia, the assistant director of the hotline, was an angel for Danielle and an extremely valuable resource in the community. Danielle's friends were all there to support her and her family with meals, cards, gifts and prayers to get them through the journey. Garden City residents are known for pulling together to support friends during challenging times. "Good friends double the joy and divide the pain."

This January, marks thirty-five years since Danielle's mom passed away. She proudly wears her name "Brit" on a necklace that was given to her from the founder of Empower as a thank you for raising awareness.

For Danielle, raising money for Empower alongside her friends was a healing process, "My friends have helped me raise money and supported all the events I've created along the way.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Empower, please visit https://weareempower.org
Adelphi NY Statewide Breast Cancer Hotline & Support Program, please visit https://breast-cancer.adelphi.edu/
Memorial Sloan Kettering's Visible Ink, please visit https://giving.mskcc.org/visible-ink
All the events brought people together for a purpose. It was my way of honoring my mom and the essence of her being. She was always kind and giving, sharing and caring. She was thoughtful and grateful and always expressed her love." Garden City friends have helped Danielle raise over $15k to support Empower and make a difference in the lives of children and young adults who have lost a parent.

This June marks sixteen years since the Jersey Baby's CD that Danielle produced with her dad was released. Celebrating his songs in new sparkling instrumental arrangements was something Danielle was passionate about making happen. She dedicated the CD to her mom.

In May, Empower will be having its first Long Island Luminaria event at The Allegria Hotel in Long Beach. Attendees can purchase a Luminaria bag in honor of or in memory of a loved one for $25. On May 22nd, the stunning display of Luminaria bags will light up Long Beach and support Empower's mission to support and connect children and young adults who've suffered parent loss.

As Danielle continues to bring attention to Empower, her mother's legacy stands as a testament to the enduring power of love, compassion, and the human spirit. Through her unwavering commitment to supporting children who have lost a parent, Danielle embodies the true essence of empowerment and of a mother's unwavering love and dedication to her children.