

WEEKLY

LAS VEGAS

FREE MAY 19-25, 2016
LASVEGASWEEKLY.COM

STUBBED TOE?
DON'T CALL 911

NEW IN
CHINATOWN:
NIU-GU

PLUS...
SETH ROGEN, DAVID SPADE,
BOB DYLAN & KYGO

ZINE
MADNESS!

BRAIN POWER

THIS IS LARRY RUVO, AN UNSTOPPABLE LAS VEGAS CRUSADER

A B E A U T I F U L M I N D

Larry Ruvo's examined life, from busboy to great benefactor of Las Vegas

BY KRISTEN PETERSON

It's the 1940s, and a young limousine driver in Niagara Falls is about to break a woman's heart.

"Angie, I love ya," he says, "but I'm going off to war, and I don't know where I'm going, and I don't know for how long, and I don't want you to wait for me and I don't want to worry about you. We're done."

Devastated, Angie calls her sister in Las Vegas and heads out West for a visit. They go to a nightclub. And the first man she sees is the one who left her back in Niagara Falls, now a soldier stationed at McCarran Field training for the South Pacific.

"He looks at my mom and says, 'I'm done,'" says Larry Ruvo, relishing the zinger of this old yarn about his father Lou, for whom Las Vegas' Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health is named. "They got engaged. He went to war. Four years later he comes back, they got married and that was it. It's one of those stories like, what are the odds?"

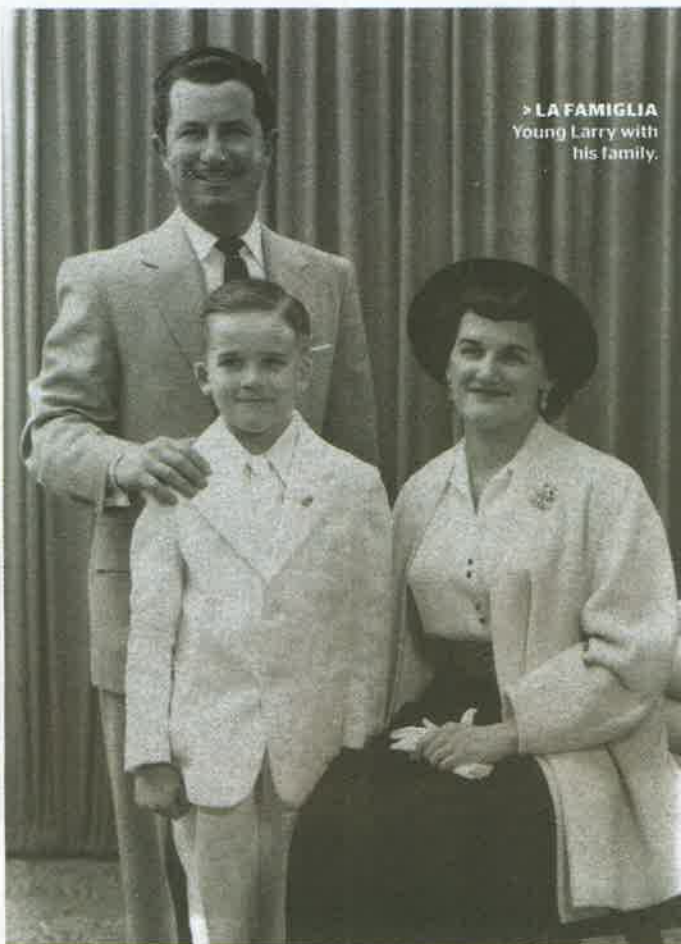
There would be many more stories. And the odds? They would play out in Las Vegas' favor for decades, a roll of the dice that would change the community immeasurably. Because without this family, without Larry, there would be no landmark clinic Downtown working

to combat brain disease. And there would be no UNLVino, the wine-tasting bash that over 25 years has raised millions to benefit students—or Ruvo's charitable efforts to improve education for local kids.

He has been honored locally and nationally for his community leadership and philanthropy, and when his nonprofit Keep Memory Alive puts on its 20th-anniversary Power of Love gala on May 21, Ruvo will be there with Tony Bennett, Wolfgang Puck and other notables throwing their weight behind the Center for Brain Health. The annual celebration of life is the medical center's financial backbone, raising funds for vital research on Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, Huntington's and other ailments, along with programs aimed at supporting caregivers and comforting patients. And according to the Keep Memory Alive Foundation, which Ruvo founded in 1996, 100 percent of the money supports that work. The organization has raised more than \$250 million, according to a spokesperson.

Larry Ruvo is an enormous reason, and Las Vegas knows his name. But his high-profile Vegas story began in a cozy restaurant, where the Italian cooking was so delicious and the love from its owners so palpable that it became its own local institution.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JON ESTEVA



> LA FAMIGLIA
Young Larry with
his family.

The Charmed Busboy

"I remember the conversation like it was yesterday," Ruvo says. He was 6, and the family had left Niagara Falls for Las Vegas, moving in with his aunt and uncle and cousin Lorraine (who would become Lt. Gov. Lorraine Hunt), a woman who could belt out a song at the Bootlegger with the old-schoolers). Soon after, his father and uncle would announce they'd bought a restaurant, and that its menu would be the Northern Italian home-cooking their wives learned from their Venetian relatives back in New York. "Well, everybody that comes over always loves your food, Angie, and always loves Mary's food," says Ruvo, emulating his dad. "And I think [if] we cook like that in a restaurant we can make a nice living."

Sitting at a table inside Southern Wine & Spirits, where he's senior managing director, Ruvo tells the tale of the family joint that opened on Fremont and Eastern in 1955 as Venetian Pizzeria. After it was relocated to West Sahara Avenue and renamed the Venetian Ristorante in 1966, it settled deeper into its hangout status—and its fame for pizza and legendary neck bones, inspired by regular customer Frank Sinatra.

An authentic Italian restaurant, it catered to the tight-knit, then-small-town community and became the place where out-of-towners had to stop, including a noted mobster who flew in just for the neck bones. This was a place where stories happened, its 43-year narrative starting with two guys just buying a restaurant. And it was the environment in which Larry Ruvo learned about the world, business, community and charity, working alongside his dad until he was a teenager. His best friend.

"I saw Larry as a little boy, working very, very hard bussing tables over there at the Venetian and always treating his parents with the greatest of admiration and respect. To me, that's the telltale

sign as to whether somebody is a decent person and whether they're going to end up being successful," says Oscar Goodman, the former three-term mayor of Las Vegas and a Ruvo family friend.

When Lou died on February 18, 1994, after a battle with Alzheimer's that went misdiagnosed for a year in Las Vegas, his son decided something had to be done. This was the man who'd taught him character, respect and humility. To illustrate, Ruvo tells a bittersweet story about the time his 14-year-old self decided to fire Venetian's chef. His dad said, "You fired the chef? First rule of business: You never fire a chef on a Friday. You hire him back and fire him on Monday. You need him for Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Those are the busy days. Monday you don't need him, so you let him go. Hire him back."

So he hired him back, and on Monday, with his dad present, fired him again. Then Lou turned to the guy and said: "I'm promoting you to general manger. Your first assignment is to fire my son." He didn't want his only child going through life with a sense of entitlement, and Ruvo never worked at the restaurant again.

That was devastating on its own, but the kid was also trying to save up for a car. So he found work elsewhere, and after graduating from Las Vegas High School in 1964 Ruvo went into the hotel business. That led him to Caesars Palace, and Steve Wynn.

"We met at Caesars, worked together at Frontier, and that's where we became best of friends. He was my age and we're around all these gaming legends and gaming experts, and there was an instant friendship," Ruvo says. "And we had similar interests. We loved to ski. We raced motorcycles. We had a lot of fun together. Still do."

Looking at the time, he says, "I'm having dinner with him at 7:30."

When Vegas Calls

Ruvo eventually left Las Vegas, to become general manager of the Playboy Club in L.A. But just two years later, it was Wynn who brought him back, to head Southern Wine & Spirits in 1970. But it was also about missing Vegas and especially his parents. "It was the right decision. At the end of the day, no matter how happy you are it's always better when you're happy with your family," Ruvo says.

Even with Lou gone, Larry still lives by that. On the first anniversary of his dad's death, a friend suggested a celebration to mark his life. "We went to Spago. We ordered all the wine, all the Scotch, everything my dad would drink, all the food he'd eat, and we told Lou Ruvo stories for about two to three hours," Ruvo says.

Another friend, John Paul DeJoria (co-founder of Paul Mitchell), happened to be eating at the restaurant that night and stopped to say hi. He asked what they were doing. "My dad's not here. We're celebrating his life," Ruvo said. They talked about Alzheimer's and the gut-wrenching loss of Lou, and then DeJoria gave Ruvo \$5,000 to donate to Alzheimer's research, an act then followed by everyone at the party. By the end of the night, \$35,000 had been raised.

There would be a formal fundraiser, and \$35 million given for the newly formed Keep Memory Alive foundation, for which Ruvo is chairman.

He contacted Dr. Leon Thal, a world-renowned Alzheimer's expert and chair of neurosciences at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine, who had treated Lou near the end. Ruvo asked a favor: With the foundation's money, could Thal establish a building at UCSD with his dad's name on it? Thal said the school's bureaucracy would winnow that \$35 million down to \$19 million, adding, "And you're doing a terrible disservice to the people of Las Vegas. You need to build something there."



> PACKAGED LIQUOR Larry (left) at Southern Wine & Spirits in 1974.

Bittersweet Symphony

Around that time, Mayor Goodman successfully arranged for 61 acres of former rail yard Downtown to become a multi-use destination for culture, health care, hospitality and restaurants. Donald Trump had actually asked to develop it, but the mayor had a different vision: an architecturally eclectic area that would become Symphony Park. And it involved Larry Ruvo and his tribute to Lou, which he was preparing to build near Southern Wine & Spirits just off the Beltway.

"He did me the biggest of favors," Goodman says. "I told Larry it would be phenomenal to have Keep Memory Alive as the keystone for what my vision was for that property in the heart and soul of the Valley. Larry had already had plans drawn up; he had commitments made. I went to him basically as a friend and said, 'Larry, as the mayor I know I'd be able to provide land for you there. Would you consider moving your dream to our Downtown?' He didn't even hesitate. He said, 'Whatever you think is right.'"

Ruvo partnered with the Cleveland Clinic, an institution the mayor had unsuccessfully tried to lure to Las Vegas. The Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health grand-opened in May 2010, heralding the arrival of the Smith Center for the Performing Arts and the Discovery Children's Museum, with more in development.

"Without Larry agreeing and being able to create what he did, I'm not sure what would be down there," Goodman says. "He was the first one. He's the one who took the chance."

> **WAITING ROOM** Mayor Oscar Goodman (left) and Larry Ruvo anticipate the Cleveland Clinic's first patient.



POWER OF LOVE 20TH ANNIVERSARY

May 21, 5:30-11 p.m., \$55-\$250. MGM Grand Garden Arena, keepmemoryalive.org.

> **LEARNING CURVES** The Frank Gehry-designed Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health.



A Name on a Building

"Everybody here said it was his heart, his corroded artery, circulation problems—never anything related to his brain. So ignorant. Dr. Thal diagnosed my dad immediately, within an hour. My biggest disappointment growing up in Las Vegas is the reputation we had that you have pain, you get on a plane," Ruvo says. "The quality of medicine had to change in this town."

To get a clinic of that magnitude off the ground, he realized the facility needed "sizzle." "In Las Vegas, the entertainment capital of the world, the boxing capital of the world, we do things different. *They gotta take some wine wholesaler who lost his dad to Alzheimer's serious,*" Ruvo remembers thinking. "And I believe it had to be packaging and marketing, and I believe it had to be a world-class architect."

Frank Gehry, the world-class architect he wanted, had no interest in working in Las Vegas. "I told him he was doing a disservice to humanity if he wouldn't allow me to use his celebrity to find a cure for diseases. But I used a lot of profanity," Ruvo recalls. "We were only nasty to each other about a total of four or five minutes, and for the next three hours it became a love fest, and today it's a romance, a marriage, a friendship."

Ruvo stops to pick up a copy of last year's *U.S. News & World Report*, which ranked Cleveland Clinic No. 1 in cardiology and heart surgery and No. 4 on its honor roll of acclaimed medical centers, a reminder to Ruvo that this is the right partnership for the long, worthwhile battle ahead.

"I think it's disgusting to grow up in a city with over 2 million people, and our doctors come to us and say we don't have one board-certified MS doctor," Ruvo says. "We're a long way from where we need to be on health care, but without the Lou Ruvo Center and the Cleveland Clinic, those 4,000 people would still be going out of state."

The head of the center is Dr. Jeffrey Cummings, who has received the Research Award of the John Douglas French Alzheimer's Research Foundation and the Ronald and Nancy Reagan Research Award of the national Alzheimer's Association.

And it has a 20-member board of dynamic players in business and medicine.

"We have several people here who are leaders in their field in neurodegenerative disorders. To be so focused and so comprehensive is highly unusual," says Dr. Dylan Wint, a researcher at the Center for Brain Health focused on optimizing diagnosis and treatment of Alzheimer's. But he adds that the clinic isn't able to keep up with demand for services, that it needs more providers and space. What keeps top clinicians invested is the promise of the research. Science is beginning to get a handle on the disease affecting more than 5 million Americans, and the center is seeking more answers. Wint says there were 25,000 visits to the clinic last year alone.

Wint came for the opportunity to have that kind of access and impact, learning quickly that the Center for Brain Health's board chair is committed to its operations. "[Larry is] here all the time—the level of passion and interest. He's not someone who threw money down, put his father's name on the building then moved on," Wint says. "He's never lost sight of his mission to improve the lives of people with these diseases, and their caregivers."

The health-care system failed Ruvo's best friend, and it opened his eyes to the scope of the problem. "It's time for this city to wake up," Ruvo says. "We will never have a great city and bring smart people, big businesses, without health care. It starts with health care and education."

Las Vegas has become another world since Ruvo rolled in with his parents back in the '50s. "In 1955, my mom and dad and I drove to Disneyland on a one-lane road," he says. "No matter when we saw a car with a Nevada plate, one of us knew who was in the car."

Growth has swept through the Valley, and Ruvo has made it his mission to look after his 2 million neighbors. "I think if anybody asked you six years ago if this were possible, they would tell you it would be impossible," Ruvo says of the shining beacon he built in Vegas. "Stay tuned."