

Agnes Pompa

A living angel on earth

It's hard to believe a quarter of a century has passed since God blessed me with the gift of an earthly angel in the form of Agnes Pompa. The manner in which she appeared in my life is something right out of a *Touched by an Angel* script.

I had silently prayed only for the strength to help a cherished child through a dreaded reconstructive surgery at a world-renowned burn center in Boston. What I received instead was nothing short of divine intervention.

There was no way of knowing at the time just how spiritually renewing that first call I received from Agnes would ultimately be. The voice may have belonged to a silver-haired professional at Pompa Bros., Inc. stone quarry, but the words could only have come from above.

I firmly believe that the cementing of a crumbling faith foundation back into the place where it had solidly stood the day I had chosen AGNES as my confirmation name in the 1960s began the day I first heard Agnes Pompa's voice on the other end of a phone line in the early 1990s.

In the course of the past 25 years, Agnes has smoothed many a rocky passage and enriched my life in immeasurable ways. In hindsight, the essay that graced the pages of the Winter 2000-2001 edition of *Saratoga Living* magazine (reprinted in miniature on the facing page) doesn't begin to do justice to her legacy as an earthly angel with the patience of a saint.

It's an honor and a joy to share the news that Agnes has since been officially recognized as being "a living angel on earth" by the Double H Ranch for children with chronic and life-threatening illnesses. The eloquent tributes that follow from Neil Golub and Max Yurenda speak volumes about this extraordinary soul we are so blessed to have walking among us.

Neil Golub (who was profiled in an earlier chapter that included a photo of Agnes blissfully "sandwiched" between him and Paul Newman) has long contributed to the fostering of the Health & Happiness that are cornerstones of the Double H in Lake Luzerne.

Asked to share his impressions of Agnes, Neil shared the following insights: "She is a lovable lady. Quiet (at least to me), big smile – always a positive attitude and such a blessing for the Double H Ranch. Her attachment to the Ranch goes way back to the very beginning. Agnes is special – and we love her dearly."



It had been the worst year of my life, and as a struggling single mother of two, I was not looking forward to the weeks and months ahead.

Tara, then 11, was due to undergo surgery at a Boston hospital, and I had promised to remain at her bedside throughout the ordeal. That meant leaving my preschooler behind with a relative. The mere thought of a lengthy separation from little Marietje was more than I could bear.

To make matters worse, a financially troubled client had just skipped town without paying me for a major writing project and my bank balance stood perilously close to zero. There was simply no possible way of earning sufficient funds prior to our departure.

Angry at myself for being so foolish as to have put all my eggs in the same editorial basket. I vowed never to trust anyone in the business world again. Everyone, I was convinced, was out only for themselves, and I would certainly never be so foolish as to extend credit to a client again.

As I sat fighting back tears in my home-based office, the phone rang and a cheerful voice at the other end identified itself as belonging to Agnes Pompa of Pompa Bros. Inc. She wanted to know more about the PR end of my consulting firm. Could I possibly design some ads?

My first instinct was to make up some excuse why I couldn't do the work. I was, after all, busy packing a pair of suitcases for the lengthy hospital stay and a third for Marietje. On the other hand, I knew the Pompas to be a highly respected family in the community. Surely they would come through with a check at the conclusion of the assignment. Desperate for travel funds, I blurted out that I would do the job on the condition that I be paid before I left for Boston. I was so embarrassed, I almost choked on the words.

The day before we were to depart for Boston, I received a call

An angel named Agnes



God does not send more suffering than we can bear -- for angels like Agnes are always around to help us carry the load.

By Ann Hanprich

asking me to come and pick up my check. Much to my surprise, Agnes, her daughter Marianne and sister-in-law Noreen greeted me at the door with huge decorated bags overflowing with presents for both Tara and Marietje.

Tara, they reasoned, would need things to do on the way to Boston and while recovering from her surgery. Marietje would need activities to cheer her up while

staying with her cousins while Mommy was away. In addition Agnes handed me an envelope with the inscription: *Do not open until you reach Boston.* I assumed it contained a Get Well card for Tara or a message of cheer for me.

I was speechless as tears welled in my eyes along with a lump in my throat. Somewhere en route to Boston my curiosity got the better of me. I decided to open

the envelope from Agnes. There inside was a cash amount that doubled what I had already been paid for my work!

The weeks spent in the reconstructive burn unit at Shriners seemed an eternity as I witnessed untold misery and suffering. I missed Marietje so much at times, I literally thought my heart would break in two.

Yet thanks to the generosity of an earthbound angel named Agnes, I was also able to find comfort, hope and renewed faith in the basic goodness of mankind.

Upon my return, I asked Agnes why she had done so much for someone she scarcely knew. Her response touched me profoundly -- and forever.

She explained that when she was a little girl, she suffered from a condition that made it impossible for her to hold her head up straight.

Experimental surgery could be performed, but it would mean transporting her to a hospital far from home. With seven children and little money, her parents could not afford to make the trip with her. The result for young Agnes had been six long weeks of loneliness in a strange hospital in a strange city. Now she wanted to ease my daughter's suffering and to spare another mother the heartache her own had surely endured during their lengthy separation so many years before.

But Agnes's generosity did not end there. Each Christmas, Santa sacks arrive for Tara and Marietje -- as well as their little sister Kiersten, who arrived a year after the Boston hospitalization.

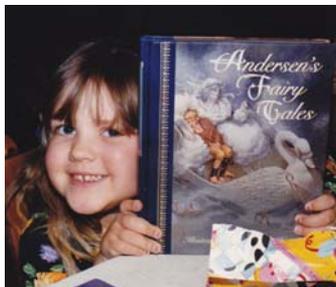
And my children are not the only ones. Although she has children and grandchildren of her own, Agnes has quietly taken a number of others under her wings, including some at the Double "H" Hole in the Wood Ranch for critically ill children.

God does not send more suffering than we can bear -- for angels like Agnes are always around to help us carry the load.

Should the day ever come when this angel's wings grow tired and she needs help carrying a load, I pray she'll do me the honor of letting me carry it for her.



Tara and Marietje as they looked around the time an earthbound angel named Agnes entered their lives in the early 1990s -- as detailed in the above essay that was penned a decade later by their mother. The heartfelt tribute was published in *Saratoga Living's* Winter 2000-01 edition.



And when I asked Double "H" Hole in the Woods Ranch Executive Director Max Yurenda if he would care to share some reflections regarding what makes Agnes Pompa such an incredible soul, his heartfelt response took my breath away.

"I am truly honored to be asked to give a quote on behalf of an extraordinary woman, philanthropist, mother, grandmother and friend," said Max during a March 2012 exchange.

"Agnes has served as a Board member for the Double H Ranch for well over 15 years and she is recognized for her unconditional love and commitment to children who are dealing with life threatening illnesses. Agnes is highly respected by her colleagues, family, the staff at Double H Ranch and the local community. She is a humble leader with a deep passion to give back to those who are less fortunate in life.

Her Double H fan club believes that she represents the core values that are critical to our society and we believe whole heartedly that she is one of our living angels on earth. Agnes has touched the lives of many and her spirit will always be a guiding force in our lives. She is an extraordinary gift to all of us who have had the privilege of sharing time and laughter with her. Health & Happiness."

Lesser known are the good needs Agnes quietly performs -- even when vacationing on tropical islands. She once went so far as to become a Fairy Godmother who turned sandals into sneakers.

Okay. So Agnes never actually waved a magic wand or sprinkled pixie dust on Mathew Alfred, but to hear the lecturer at the London Hotel School in West Kensington, England, tell it, she is the closest thing on earth to a Fairy Godmother.

Employed as the Entertainment Coordinator at the Sandals St. Lucia when he first met Agnes and her now late husband, Nelson, in 1994, teenaged Mathew was flattered, but dumfounded, when the vacationing couple took a special interest in his life.

"Before they left The Golden Players Club at the Sandals, Agnes said they had come to regard me as their adopted son and asked if I could have anything I wanted from the USA, what would it be. Not knowing how to deal with this offer and given the nature of my job then, I replied that I'd always wished I had a pair of sneakers. Sure enough, a pair of high top sneakers materialized a short time after they returned to the States -- and they were exactly the right size!"

That simple gesture made a lasting impression on Mathew who upon this time was always at the other end of the spectrum -- the one giving; the one offering.

"I had rubbed elbows with a lot of well-to-do tourists at The Golden Players Club, but none of them had reached out to me in this way before. For strangers to be so generous -- expecting absolutely nothing in return -- was absolutely amazing to me. It was the first time I witnessed a quiet act of sharing and giving. I had encountered a pair of Earth Angels; it was something that profoundly changed my perspective on life."

In a lighter note, Mathew remains grateful to Agnes -- who was once the Cheerleading Coach at St. Mary's School in Ballston Spa -- for helping him motivate reluctant female guests to participate in recreational activities such as volleyball and shuffleboard on the island paradise.



With Agnes Pompa above are John Hendrickson, Max Yurenda and Marylou Whitney. At her side in matching western attire is now late husband Nelson. Joining her and Max at Pompa Point are beloved daughter Marianne Pompa LaRoche and sister Ann Groski. To learn more about Double H Ranch, please visit www.doublehranch.org.



Not long after being gifted with the pair of sneakers, Mathew was promoted to the Food and Beverage Trainee Manager at the Sandals Ocho Rios in Jamaica where he reconnected with the Pompas. “This marked my formal introduction to Hotel Management where comprehensive programs were undertaken in all departments of the resort with emphasis on Food & Beverage Management,” says Mathew, whose duties included hosting dinner parties for returning guests

By July of 1996, Mathew had an opportunity to assume the position of Assistant Food & Beverage Manager at the Beaches Turks & Caicos, Providenciales, Turks & Caicos Islands. In this capacity, he oversaw the day-to-day operations of seven bars, five themed restaurants, banqueting and back of house operations. Along with Human Resources, he was in employee recruitment and training functions. He also monitored the Health & Safety and compliance issues of the Food & Beverage areas and was part of the planning committee responsible for the transition to an All Inclusive Beverages Resort.

As well as Mathew was doing, it soon became clear to him and to the Pompas that many windows of opportunity would remain forever closed to him unless he could secure an education to rival that of his peers. “We told Mathew we were not super rich, but that we would like to send him a few dollars to put toward his education. Nelson thought Mathew was a go-getter. He believed in him and wanted to give him some of the advantages Nelson had not had when he was Mathew’s age,” recalls Agnes. Mathew agreed to accept the financial aid only if the couple would agree to let him repay them at a future date.

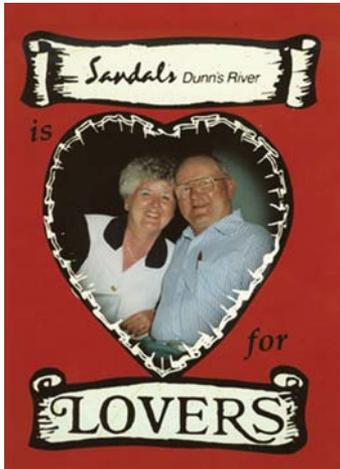
Keenly aware that he had been given a golden opportunity, Mathew first took a course in becoming a Certified Hotel Supervisor offered by the American Hotel & Motel Association in Ohio followed by a program in Developing Management Strategies for Tomorrow at Ecole Hoteliere De Lausanne in Lausanne, Switzerland. It was now 1998 and Mathew was supporting himself by laboring full-time as Junior Assistant Manager at the Sandals Halcyon, Castries, Saint Lucia.

Dressed for success in shoes rather than sneakers and working with the Executive Office, he reported directly to the General Manager. It wasn’t long before Mathew distinguished himself by assisting with the operation of the resort and auditing department service standards as well as submitting periodic reports and recommendations. He also established the framework for the “greening” of the resort with reference to Green Globe Standards.

A year later, Mathew was promoted to the position of Front Office Manager which entailed supervising the daily operations of everything from the Front Desk to Concierge Guest Relations and Bell Services. During his two-year tenure, the resort received a 91 per cent guest satisfaction rating. His duties increased the following year when he assumed the position of Front Office & Housekeeping Manager. This provided an opportunity to streamline combined tasks and improve lines of communications. This, in turn, led to an improvement of the guest satisfaction averaging 90 per cent over 24 months. In addition, Mathew devised a unique control system that made it possible to account for more than 95 per cent of operating linen at any given time. Mathew earned a BSc Economics and an MSc in Public Health & Promotion.



Ann Hauprich photographed Mathew Alfred when he journeyed from England to visit "Fairy Godmother" Agnes Pompa in Ballston Spa 15 years after their first meeting at the Sandals St. Lucia. Now a university scholar, Mathew says "Fairy Godmother" Agnes and her late husband Nelson paved the way for his future success when they took him under their wings following a chance vacation encounter in 1994. A teenaged Mathew was captured on film that year when he posed with a group that included Agnes and Nelson.



But the best was yet to be, thanks to some help from his Fairy Godmother and Fairy Godfather in Upstate New York. With encouragement and support from the Pompas, Mathew began working on his BSc Economics specializing in Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics in the United Kingdom. He subsequently earned his Masters in Hotel Management from Thames University in Ealing, London, followed by an MSc in Public Health and Health Promotion with a special interest in workplace health promotion within the hotel industry from Brunel University, Uxbridge England.

What is most remarkable is that Mathew managed to achieve high grades as a full-time student while at the same time juggling hefty responsibilities in a broad variety of hospitality industry settings abroad.

These ranged from working as a Travel Consultant at the Sandals and Beaches Holidays in London – a temporary opening that required him to provide cover to the Sandals UK Sales Office while full-time agents took familiarization trips to the Caribbean – to Assistant Manager & Trainer’s position at Thistle Park & Palace Hotel in London. The latter entailed supervising the daily Food & Beverage operations of two restaurants, two bars and nine banquets and conference facilities.

All of this hard work ultimately paid off when Mathew was awarded a position as a part-time lecturer at the London Institute of Technology & Research Health Economics and Health, Nutrition & Corporate Strategy.

The teen who once yearned to wear a pair of American sneakers is now a graduate with more than a decade of hotel management experience to his credit. He has proven ability to provide the highest level of customer service while consistently reducing expenditures. Knowledgeable in all aspects of market research, data analysis, budgeting, cost control and staff, facilities and service quality management, Mathew is regarded as an asset to the prestigious London Hotel School in West Kensington.

After a year of consolidating his teaching, he has begun efforts to pilot a workplace health promotion program concentrating on diabetes prevention among hotel employees. “Now I go to work, but it doesn’t feel like work,” Mathew confided during a recent visit to his Fairy Godmother’s home in Ballston Spa. “I truly enjoy helping and guiding others – something I’d not have been in a position to do had it not been for Agnes and Nelson.

Although Agnes insists Mathew would have succeeded even without the financial boost he received from her and her late husband, but he is not so sure. “It’s been a beautiful struggle, but my life would be very different today if Agnes and Nelson hadn’t come along when they did. Knowing they cared about and believed in me meant failure was not an option. I kept my eyes on that. Whenever I began to doubt myself or worry about whether I could achieve my goals, I would think of them and the obstacles they told me they had faced and overcome in their own lives. I would draw strength from that and persevere where I might otherwise have been tempted to quit.”

So much for needing magic wands or pixie dust to move mountains!

All that’s needed, it seems, is a lot of faith, hope, love – topped with a pair of perfectly fitting high topped sneakers.



Hearts in the sand ... and many other amazing places!

Since the passing of her beloved husband Nelson, widow Agnes Pompa has been blessed with many signs and wonders -- mostly in the shape of hearts. Among the heavenly finds was a rock the size of a life-size heart ... with a hole in it. Another time, she arrived at work early one morning to find a perfectly shaped heart formed in stone dust on an exterior weigh scale. Only after the image had been photographed was it blown away by a gust of wind. PORTRAIT BY ANTONIO BUCCA.



Another Nelson-related heart find by Agnes might be dubbed a "Love Dove" because the bird with a distinctive heart-shaped marking (see inset) came to eat out of her hand every morning and afternoon during a 2011 visit to a favorite tropical paradise where she and Nelson, who succumbed to a massive heart attack in June 2003, had enjoyed numerous romantic vacations together.