

Houpis built a life, a business, a family and a chorus in Keene

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Sentinel Staff • May 4, 1996 • *Monadnock Profile* • (Cheshiremen re-pub: 2019-Mar - ss)

WHEN HE began picking on the freshman in his orchestra, Arthur Fiedler had no way of knowing the impact he would have on music in Keene.

What Fiedler did know is this: The young Boston University violinist talked too much.

Fiedler, as director of the school's symphony, demanded unflinching attention to his instructions. So, when he caught young Constantine N. "Dino" Houpis talking when he should have been listening, he laid into him.

The ridiculing and berating finally forced Houpis to quit.

Fiedler went on to become the legendary head of the Boston Pops. .

The lowly freshman began to sing, swapping his violin for the university glee club. The change suited Houpis, who preferred to mix his music with sociability.

Last Saturday, more than 50 years later, the audience at the 44th annual Keene Cheshiremen barbershop chorus show reaped the benefits of that fallout between teacher and student.

Houpis, the chorus director, put on a great show, as usual.

And it was his last. After last Saturday's performance at Keene Middle School, Houpis turned over the director's baton to Jim Flanders.



Constantine N. "Dino" Houpis in his barbershop chorus regalia, at his home. (1996)

Free of the teaching and managerial assignments he'd handled for almost four decades, Houpis is returning his full attention to the strength of his own tenor voice and how it fits in with those of other singers.

At 75, he figures he has many more performances in him.

Houpis isn't the oldest member of the Cheshiremen. Some are in their late-80s. But he is among the originals.

After graduating from college, where he directed the male chorus, and a spell in the Army, where he attained the rank of captain, Houpis came home to Keene to work at his family's Main Street business — the Crystal Restaurant. Later, it metamorphosed into Henry David's Restaurant. (ed. - now Margarita's).

That's what Houpis likes about it. He says he's never missed the individualism demanded of the violin.

"I love the fellowship, the great spirit you get rubbing shoulders with the others," he said of barbershop singing. Sitting in the living room of his Main Street home, Houpis' eyes light up when he talks about his music.

"Song is a great healer," he says. "It's a kind of tonic for frustrations, especially the frustrations of business. It breaks down the stresses of everyday life."

These days, there isn't much bothering Houpis. Classical music floats through his house on a rainy afternoon. Snug in a fisherman-knit sweater, Houpis welcomes a visitor with raspberry tea and cookies. Houpis and his wife of 46 years, Yonnie, are surrounded in their home by pictures of their three grown children and their young grandchildren. They've just had a visit from their daughter Elana — everyone knows her as Lela — who lives with her husband and children in California. Houpis is about to visit one of his sons, Nicholas. Another son, Chris, lives in Amherst, Mass.

Music builds character

The family is very close, Nicholas confirms by telephone from his home in Brighton, Mass.

"Growing up in our house, there was a very loving environment and a very strong working one, too," he says.

The Houpis children learned early on that devotion to family and work would make them strong. And appreciation of music, whether it was singing or piano playing, would give them character.

Their father shared his love for music with his children, but didn't force it on them, Nicholas said.

"Music has always been my dad's love," he said. "It's a real source of pride with him. He feels the music and wants everyone to share in his level of enthusiasm for it.

"We always had music in our house, but it was never a competitive thing. My dad wanted us to play music to teach us the spirit of it. He'd say it was good for us."

While practicing the scales wasn't always tops on Nicholas' list of favorite things to do, "I learned later on, in high school, how right he was. We had a talent that we could apply in social situations."

The Houpis children also had a form of expression — music — that helped soothe the daily frustrations of hard work. Like their father before them, they grew up in the family restaurant business. They were expected to help out at the Crystal, doing whatever needed doing.

Sometimes, that meant being called at home to fill in for an absent busboy or waitress.

"Sometimes it was challenging, being dad's son," Nicholas said, "getting a call to come in at strange hours because someone hadn't shown up for work."

But watching their father get up every morning and trundle off to the restaurant, often working until 1 or 2 in the morning and sometimes even later, Houpis' children could hardly complain.

"He worked his butt off, my mother too. They taught us by example a very strong work ethic," Nicholas said.

Dino Houpis said he got that work ethic the same way his children did.

His parents came to America as children and built a good life through toil and perseverance. Houpis' father, Nicholas, left his home in Sparta when he was 13, smuggled aboard a cargo ship. He joined his brothers in Lowell, Mass., where they lived together in one room and worked in the textile mills to get started in America.

His mother's arrival in America, at age 9, was less traumatic. She was a passenger aboard a ship, not a stowaway like her future husband. She came over with her older sister from the city of Tripoli and settled into a relatively comfortable life in Dorchester, Mass., and then Brighton, Mass., with the family.

At that time, in the 1910s, Lowell was New England's social center for Greek immigrants. "It was like the little Athens of New England," Houpis said.

His mother's family was a part of that society, and his father was a growing force on its business scene. He'd branched out into restaurant work, like many other immigrants, and had built up a career.

Given Nicholas Houpis' growing success in business, it was arranged that he marry Helen, the girl from Tripoli.

Helen Houpis gave birth to three children, John, Marion and Constantine. Her husband owned two restaurants, a newsstand and fruit store, and was a trustee of the local Greek church. The family lived well, in a grand house in Lowell. The children had tutors and private music lessons and Mrs. Houpis entertained the cream of New England's Greek society in her home.

Then came the stock-market crash of 1929. Two years later, all that the enterprising immigrant from Sparta had built up in America was gone, except for a small restaurant in Keene.

He'd bought into it, hoping to provide a steady job to a wayward relative, Dino Houpis said. It became the family lifeline during the Great Depression.

The Houpis family left the 11- room home in Lowell and moved into a three-room apartment above the Crystal. Dino Houpis was just 10 years old then; the move to Keene didn't seem all that stressful to him. But it was tough on his parents, especially his mother.

"She was a very social person who was accustomed to extravagant and lavish entertaining in her home. She was so accustomed to the social life of Lowell and Boston, which were vibrant centers of Greek culture," he said. "She had hit bottom."

'We all worked'

Still, the family was luckier than many others, who were left with nothing after the crash. The entire family became immersed in what they did have — the Crystal, and each other.

"We all worked; there was no more tutored life for us kids," Houpis laughed.

His days began at 5 a.m., washing dishes. Then it was off to school. "I hated to go to school

smelling of the kitchen, but you couldn't avoid it," he recalled.

In school, Houpis pursued his outlet - music. He played the violin and even picked up the tuba during high school. He also sang with an a cappella choir — singing without accompaniment.

Sports weren't an option, because they conflicted with his restaurant work before and after school.

His parents didn't discourage music, though: "I guess they knew how important it was to me." Not only did Houpis work at the restaurant, go to school, and indulge in music, but he also held down three other jobs, earning money for college.

Education was a priority in the Houpis family. Older brother John became a physician. Sister Marion went to Radcliffe College. Dino planned to study music at Boston University, but, after he was accepted by the college of music, his father persuaded him that a degree in business would give him more security.

Dino had already kept the books for his cousin's candy shop, and knew he was good at numbers.

"I'm glad I listened to my father," Houpis said. "I did love accounting."

Music became his hobby — and stayed that, despite the episode with Fiedler — while he studied to become an accountant. He never dreamed he'd be running the family restaurant someday. In fact, he dreaded the notion.

"I could not see my life spent toiling over dishes," Houpis said. The drudgery of the work made him cringe.

He completed his accounting degree in three years and passed the first two parts of the examination for certified public accountants.

But it was January 1943, and the country was at war, and everyone had to do his part.

A month after graduating, Houpis was in Army basic training. He'd managed to earn exactly one paycheck from a Boston accounting firm in between.

He fully expected to resume his accounting career when he got out of the Army. But duty to family intervened.

The war had been rough on his parents.

"The business was thriving, but they were exhausted," he said. They needed his help, and he gave it.

"It was easier to stay than deal with the guilt if I'd left them like that," he said.

'A heart of gold'

Thirty-four years and many changes later, Houpis sold the restaurant that had sustained three generations of his family. Like their father, Houpis' children wanted to pursue their own careers. Unlike Houpis, they were able to do so.

Still, they took valuable lessons from their parents' tireless work.

"He worked so hard, but still had a heart of gold," Nicholas said of his father. "He had to be one of the most caring and sympathetic employers around. He felt responsible for people and helped them when they needed it."

Nicholas recalled that, on some mornings, his father wouldn't get home until 5 or 6 a.m. "If he heard the fire horn blowing on his way home from work and he knew where it was, he'd turn around, open up the restaurant and make an urn of coffee to take to the firefighters," he said. "He did that more than a few times on very cold mornings."

After moving out of the kitchen to focus more on the customer-service part of the restaurant business, Houpis said he grew to like it more. The customers who streamed through the doors became a part of his life.

From his restaurant, he watched Keene grow and change, and his business kept pace with the changes. Much of Keene and the region passed through the Crystal's doors until he sold the place in 1980.

In retirement, Houpis didn't slow down a bit, his son said. If he's not at a weekly chorus meeting, or a barbershop singing competition, or a performance, he's volunteering his time.

He takes particular pride in his work for SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives, a U.S. Small Business Administration program that pairs business veterans with people who need advice about their businesses.

"I love it when I get these people telling me they think it would be fun to own a restaurant," Houpis chuckled. "They think it would be cute to do, I just have to shake my head and think back to all the hard work and long hours that go into it."

But throw in some music, and life is pretty good.



BACK IN THE CHORUS - Dino Houpis sits on the risers at Keene Middle School last Saturday night, after his last show as director of the Keene Cheshiremen barbershop chorus. In the future, he'll just be another tenor. (May 4, 1996)