

Blujazz owners fought cancer and bureaucracy to start their club

Howard Reich

And you thought you had stress.

Three summers ago, jazz violinist Diane Delin and her husband, jazz guitarist Greg Pasenko, got enough bad news to last a lifetime.

In June 2007, they lost artistic control of the newly refurbished Skokie Theatre, which they had reopened the previous month as a jazz shrine.

In July, Delin was diagnosed with [breast cancer](#); within a week of her mother getting diagnosed with [uterine cancer](#).

Delin underwent surgery in August, about the same time she realized her planned adoption of a baby from Guatemala wasn't going to be completed within the promised nine months (in fact, it took three years of agonized waiting).

And, oh yes, one more thing: All the while, Delin and Pasenko were planning to open their own jazz club, not exactly a stress-free endeavor under the best of circumstances. The recent economic crash did not help.

Yet three years later, mother, father and baby Rafael Fernando Delin Pasenko are huddling on the stage of the newly opened Club Blujazz, at 1540 W. North Ave. Rafael pounds gleefully on the ebony Yamaha grand, while his parents smile lovingly at him, marveling that they're seated in one of the smartest-looking jazz rooms in the city. Which they built.

If they had to pick one word that sums up how they got through all this misery, pressure, anxiety and fear, they both know exactly what that word is: Rafael.

"What kept me going, in addition to Greg's incredible support, was seeing pictures of Rafael and knowing this was the future I was going for," says Delin, 52. As she speaks, she's trying to hold on to a beautiful, perpetually fidgeting 3-year-old wearing a shirt embossed with the words "I'm With the Band."

Rafael, says Delin, "was a light to look forward to, a sign of determination that, yes, I can get through this."

In so doing, Delin and Pasenko not only have sustained their lives and expanded their family but also enriched jazz in Chicago; or at least have started to. Already, Club Blujazz, named for the Chicago record label the couple launched in 1995, has scored several artistic coups. Pianist Fred Hersch hadn't played Chicago for years before drawing capacity crowds to Club Blujazz last weekend. Coming engagements by leading figures such as vibist Joe Locke and pianist Denny Zeitlin suggest that Delin and Pasenko are quite literally reaching for the stars.

Not that it was easy to get to this point.

Three years ago, as Delin was being brought to the operating room, "she held on to a picture of Rafael," recalls her sister, Deborah Delin Dorn. The violinist had to relinquish the snapshot a few moments later, "but as soon as she was wheeled out of surgery, Greg put that picture back in her

hand. She also had pictures of Rafael all over the house. It was like this beacon of hope during all her battles with [cancer](#)."

Even as Delin was fighting her illness and wondering if Rafael would ever really be theirs, Pasenko was forging ahead with another of their longtime dreams: creating a jazz room of their own. After the couple had parted ways with the board of the Skokie Theatre Music Foundation over what Delin calls "different visions," Pasenko began scouring the city for real estate.

"He started looking around for buildings, and I was like, 'Just let me get through chemo' but, actually, it was a good distraction," says Delin.

Adds Pasenko, 60: "We had our tough moments."

Meanwhile, Delin and Pasenko wondered whether the child they had been promised from Guatemala would be liberated from the red tape tying up the adoption process.

"There were a lot of tears, a lot of frustration," says Pasenko. "We were going through all these different (bureaucratic) processes. We had to go through classes. We were fingerprinted four times."

The hurdles were so numerous and formidable, and the outcome so uncertain, explains Delin, "that our joke was: If every parent had to go through this to get a child, this would be the greatest form of contraception ever invented."

Yet Delin and Pasenko persevered on all fronts. Delin completed chemotherapy in January 2008 and radiation in April of that year; the couple flew to Guatemala (on seven days' notice) to pick up Rafael in January 2009, a few days short of his second birthday; and the musicians found the site for their planned club in May of that year.

"To be honest with you, it was a dump," says Pasenko of the former sports bar with huge, U-shaped booths, a plywood DJ station and a kitchen that was "a disaster."

The build-out took months longer than the couple had expected, delaying the opening to March.

But as far as the place looks and sounds, it was worth the wait. With seating for just 100 in a narrow, shoebox-shaped room, Club Blujazz easily conveys intimacy, a key ingredient for the art of jazz. The club's interior brick walls, sleek track lighting and unusually comfortable furnishings (for a jazz club) distinguish the room from grungier places around the city.

So, too, will its programming, say Delin and Pasenko, who are offering a mix of European artists and homegrown ones.

The greater thrust, though, will be to develop Club Blujazz as a venue that's about something more than serving drinks to a raucous audience while musicians struggle to be heard.

From the outset, the couple envisioned creating a serious listening room "where we could do creative projects, educational events, clinics, humanitarian projects," says Pasenko.

To that end, the couple operates a nonprofit organization; Creative Arts Exchange; through which they plan to stage such ventures at Club Blujazz. In addition, they aspire to create a jazz ensemble in residence at the club, an apprenticeship program for young musicians and live radio broadcasts of the kind they had once hoped to bring to the Skokie Theatre (which today operates less as a jazz venue and more as a multiarts, community-oriented performance space).

For now, though, the question is whether the fledgling room can stay alive long enough — in a brutal economy — to get into the black.

"We can be — not in the black — but making a decent living in six months to a year," says Pasenko. "It will take longer than that to get out of debt, but we'll be able to pay our bills and make some money. We've already learned a lot."

Many people are pulling for him and his wife, including their competitors.

"The more (clubs) the merrier," says [Green Mill Jazz Club](#) owner Dave Jemilo. "If they take a little (business) from me one week, and we take a little away from them the next week, that's the way it is.

"But the more clubs, the more fans for jazz."

Adds Wayne Segal, co-owner of the storied Jazz Showcase "I think it's a good idea they have at Club Blujazz. There are so many wonderful musicians in this city that need a place to play. … There's plenty (of) space for another club."

Yet there's a lot at stake here. Though Delin and Pasenko don't offer numbers, they acknowledge that the financial obligation they incurred in launching Club Blujazz is "a big deal," says Delin.

"Very big," adds Pasenko, winding up for a quip: "I understand Costa Rica doesn't have an extradition policy."

Meanwhile, there's cause to celebrate. Delin is "cancer free," she says, and her mother is "doing fine," says Delin's sister, Deborah Delin Dorn.

Stress levels, however, haven't entirely abated. Beyond trying to get a jazz club afloat, there's the matter of a certain 3-year-old who devours attention. To accommodate him, Delin and Pasenko spot each other, alternating shifts at home, at the club and on various stages.

Often, Pasenko has asked himself: "At my age … how do we do this? … It hasn't been easy. I won't lie to you.

"About a month ago, I was just in tears. I just realized how much I am falling in love with this kid."

Should Club Blujazz survive and flourish, jazz in Chicago will be the better for it. And one 3-year-old from Guatemala is in for the time of his life.

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