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Meet Mark and Karen Danni
From the Stages of New York City to Naples

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Cover Photo Courtesy of Brian Tietz

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From the Stages of New York City to Naples

By Sydney Van Dreason | Photos Courtesy of Mark and Karen Danni

Renowned theatre director Peter Brook is often attributed with a powerful quote about theatre: "To go to the theatre is to fall in love with life."

Mark and Karen Danni are two people who have spent most of their lives in and around the theatre, falling in love with music, performing, each other...and with life. As seasoned professionals in the theatre, Mark and Karen love sharing their passion with the Naples community, and their journey into the region's theatre scene is an exciting one.

Every story has a beginning, and this one starts in New York City...

Act I, Scene I: The Meeting

The first time Mark picked up drumsticks was when he was 10-years-old. His musical talent was quickly noticed by local

music directors, and he was invited to play in musical theatre orchestra pits all over his native Buffalo, N.Y. His passion for music led him to Baldwin-Wallace University in Cleveland to study conducting and percussive skills as a music education major.

One semester, Mark was taking a music history and literature class, and it was there where he met Karen, a musical theatre and marketing student. The two classmates hit it off, and they went on their first date on January 28, 1987, a date they still celebrate every year.

Act II, Scene I: Off to Broadway and More

Shortly after graduating, Mark and Karen moved to New York City to pursue their dreams of working on Broadway. Mark got his start playing drums in the Broadway production of "Grand Hotel, The Musical," and Karen started performing in



The Danni family attending a Rolling Stones concert in 2015.



A "Bills Christmas" in 2023.

and choreographing various regional, international and Off-Broadway shows.

From there, the world was their stage.

After playing several other Broadway shows and touring with "The Phantom of the Opera," Mark went on to conduct the national tours of "Les Misérables" and "Barnum" and direct regional and Off-Broadway shows.

Karen also continued to be involved in the entertainment industry as an actress, singer, dancer and choreographer. Some of her work includes performing in national and international tours of "The Wizard of Oz" and "On The Town," appearing in films like "Step Mom" and "The Astronaut's Wife" and appearing in TV shows like "The Guiding Light" and "Sex and the City." She has had the honor of performing at leading theatres around the country.

"Karen is a director's dream," Mark said. "While we have the benefit of a harmonious personal relationship, she also brings her natural intuitiveness, an amazing work ethic, a deep knowledge of her roles and a master of her craft to every performance."

Act II, Scene II: The Show Must Go On... in Naples

Mark and Karen's first introduction to Naples was in 1999 when Mark's current job as a percussionist in "Fame: the Musical" brought him to the Naples Philharmonic Center for the Arts (now Artis—Naples). During the show's run in Naples, Karen came to

visit, and she recognized the promise the area held. The couple ended up buying a house in Naples Park to use as a vacation home and investment property, renting it out to actors and musicians who were on tour and playing SWFL.

It wasn't until late 2001 when the Dannis made their way back to Naples.

"We learned that the Naples Players were looking to hire a director and choreographer for its 2002 production of 'Oklahoma,'" Karen said. "We met with the artistic director, Dallas Dunnegan, and we both accepted jobs in August 2001."

While working on "Oklahoma," Mark and Karen met Allan Wolf, a volunteer assistant stage manager for the production and also the Director of Admissions for The Community School of Naples. The school wanted to expand its arts curriculum, and Allan didn't hesitate to introduce the Dannis to the school's headmaster.

"We toured Community School with our son, Luke, in a stroller," Mark said. "I was offered the opportunity to create a theatre program for the students, but we were happy in New York with our professional lives. Karen's intuition was at it again though when she nudged me awake one night with an idea: Agree to start the theatre program in Naples in exchange for starting an Equity theatre company that would be in residence at the school's beautiful 250-seat G&L Theatre."

This marked the beginning of Mark's career in theatre education as well as the birth of TheatreZone, the first Equity theatre



Karen dancing when she was a kid.



Karen Danni

company in Naples.

When it came to the creation of TheatreZone, Mark and Karen had a clear vision in mind.

“We liked the idea of being ‘in the Zone’ when you came to our productions,” Mark said. “As musical theatre was our passion, we would search for the hidden musical treasures of Broadway and produce productions of these award-winning gems.”

TheatreZone was established as a nonprofit theatre in 2005. The organization celebrates its 20th anniversary at an event in February 2025.

Act III, Scene I: Life in Naples Today

Mark and Karen are thrilled to still be sharing their passion for musical theatre. The 2024–2025 season for TheatreZone begins with its opening production this month from December 20–December 22.

To view the full list of upcoming productions, visit <https://theatre.zone>.

Mark and Karen are also proud parents to Luke (23) and their twins, Zack (22) and Maxine (22), all of whom have grown up to share their parents’ love of the performing arts.

Luke recently graduated from The University of Cincinnati College - Conservancy of Music’s acting program, and he is now working to begin his career in TV and film. Zack is currently

attending Columbia College Chicago as a comedy writing and performance major. As he enters his final year, he is excited to spend a semester at The Second City, which is known as the world’s largest training facility for comedy and improv.



Mark Danni

Mark Danni - Amadeus



Mark playing the drums as a kid.



Mark and Karen on their wedding day.

Maxine is also in her final year at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where she studies musical theatre. This past summer, she finished a national tour, and she looks forward to moving to New York City after graduation to pursue her dreams.

With a family of musical theatre lovers, music has always been a favorite pastime in their lives. Mark owns an extensive CD collection of various musical genres, and one of his favorite things to do is attend concerts with his kids, all of whom inherited their dad's love of classic rock.

"When the kids were little, we attended a KISS concert, and we all dressed up as the KISS members and had an amazing time," Karen said. "Paul Stanley actually threw out one of his guitar pics to Zack."

From the stages of New York City to Naples, Mark and Karen Danni have spread a love of the theatre to everyone they meet. The story of the Danni family is far from over, and they look forward to adding new Acts and Scenes as they continue their careers and passions across Naples and beyond.

All Exeunt

Upcoming TheatreZone Productions



All shows are performed at the intimate, 250-seat G&L Theatre located on the campus of The Community School of Naples. To view a complete list of shows for the 2024-2025 season, visit <https://theatre.zone/shows>.

"HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS"

A SWFL tradition celebrating its eighth annual production, this show delights audiences with traditional and popular Christmas songs, sparkling and elaborate costumes and Christmas-themed scenery.

When: December 20-22, 2024

Time: 7:30pm (December 20-21); 2pm (December 21-22)

Cost: \$50-\$85 per person



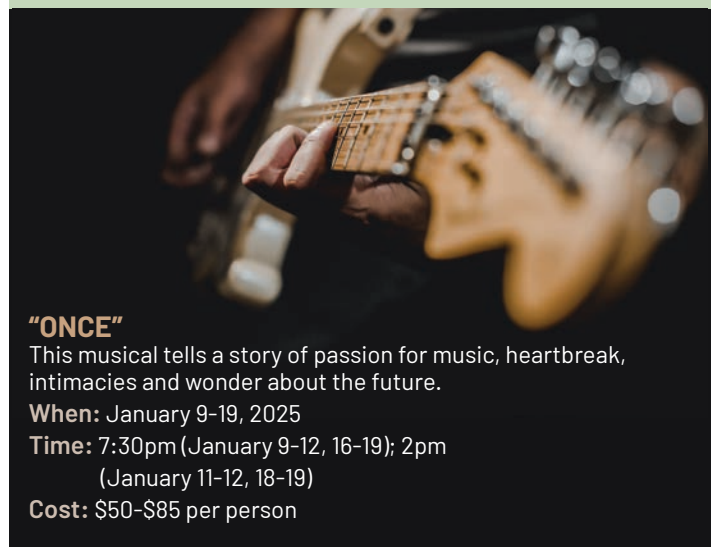
"ONCE"

This musical tells a story of passion for music, heartbreak, intimacies and wonder about the future.

When: January 9-19, 2025

Time: 7:30pm (January 9-12, 16-19); 2pm (January 11-12, 18-19)

Cost: \$50-\$85 per person



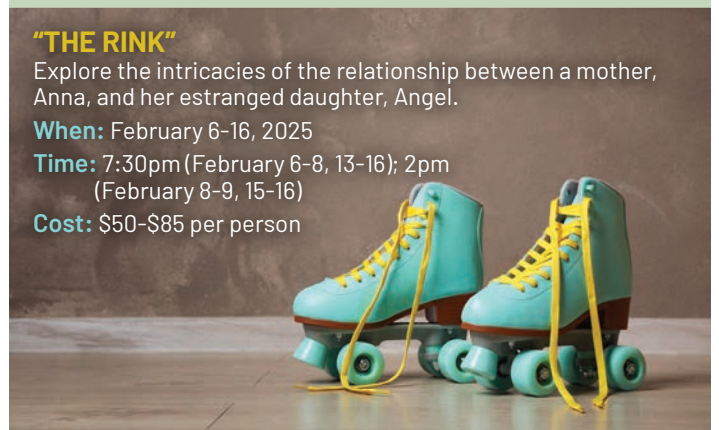
"THE RINK"

Explore the intricacies of the relationship between a mother, Anna, and her estranged daughter, Angel.

When: February 6-16, 2025

Time: 7:30pm (February 6-8, 13-16); 2pm (February 8-9, 15-16)

Cost: \$50-\$85 per person



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