

Fairy Godmother turned sandals into sneakers

Agnes Pompa never 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, the Ballston Spa, NY, woman is the closest thing on earth to a Fairy Godmother. Employed as the Entertainment Coordinator at the Sandals St. Lucia when he first met Mrs. Pompa 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 at 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 encounter a pair of Earth Angels; it was something that changed my perspective on life.”

On 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.

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.



Mathew Alfred says "Fairy Godmother" Agnes Pompa and her now late husband Nelson (far right) helped to pave the way for his future success after taking him under their wings following a chance vacation encounter.

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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 Lausanna in Lausanna, 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.

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.



A teenaged Mathew Alfred with Agnes and Nelson Pompa & fellow Golden Players in 1994.