

# Outlook

SAN MARINO

## Rolling Out the Welcome Mat at the USC President's House



C. L. Max Nikias and wife Niki take a stroll in the rose garden of the USC President's House in San Marino, which has served as the residence of the university's chief executive since 1979.

By Eric Noland

A houseful of people can be a source of great merriment, but hosting doesn't come naturally to everyone. The many details of preparation can be a source of anxiety, and at the event itself, the slightest oversight can trigger mortification. Beyond that, there's an abiding fear that guests might be bored, or annoyed, or, worse, checking their watches and wondering if it would be

impolite to leave this early.

Fortunately for USC, hospitality comes naturally to its president, C. L. Max Nikias, and his wife, Niki. In fact, as natives of Cyprus, it might be embedded in their DNA. They're quite at ease while hosting groups large and small at the USC President's House, an expansive yet comfortable estate in San Marino that has been home to USC presidents for the past 35 years.

"In Greek culture, you never sit down to have dinner alone," Niki said recently while seated in the home's richly paneled living room. "There's always the neighbor, the cousin, the mother-in-law, the father-in-law who will drop by and say, 'Well, what's up for dinner?' And you don't even plan on it. Not only that, but you also plan a lot of parties — birthdays, celebrating by hosting dinners at the house. It's



*C. L. Max Nikias and wife Niki in the rose garden of the USC President's House in San Marino.*

something that I've done a lot."

"The rule is," Max added, "you don't do it unless you really love it. The pressure is always there, the time commitment is always there. The challenge you face is how you pace yourself. But when you have to be on, you have to be on, and you have to love it. You can't fake it."

The Nikiases have ample opportunities to put this into practice. They estimate that they host 50-60 events per year at the home, from intimate little dinners to parties for 400 people on the rear lawn, under a tent. The number of guests in any year routinely exceeds 3,500, they said. "And we shake hands with every one of them as they come through the door," Max said over his ever-present laugh. It's no exaggeration, apparently. "It doesn't matter the size of the party — when you walk in the door, they're both right there to greet you," said Lorna Reed, a San Marino resident who has been on USC's Board of Trustees since 1987. "Large or small, they make you

feel you're the most important guest to walk through that door."

Because of that crush of visitors, the Nikiases say they are sensitive to the impact the busy entertainment schedule might have on their sleepy little neighborhood in the northern reaches of San Marino. For the big events, typically held in early December, they not only notify neighbors, they invite them, along with various city officials.

"I think they are generous hosts and they make people feel welcome," said Mayor Eugene Sun, who has attended several of the events. "And it's also been a good neighborhood relationship. San Marino is a big SC community, so I think it's natural for them to reach out to the community for good will. I think San Marino is proud to have the president and Niki in town."

Having the USC President's House here does, indeed, seem like a natural fit. It happened when Dr. Seeley Mudd, a former dean of USC's School of

Medicine, left his home to the university in his estate, with the stipulation that it house the university president. It has done so since 1979.

Max Nikias, who came to USC as an engineering professor in 1991 and subsequently held such positions as dean and provost, had been to the home many times when it was occupied by his predecessor, Steven Sample. After he became USC's president in August 2010, the university undertook some renovations to the house, and the Nikiases moved from their longtime home in Rancho Palos Verdes (which they still have) on the day before Thanksgiving that year.

To demonstrate just how undaunted they are by the hosting of large gatherings, they opened their new home to 400 USC students the next day for Thanksgiving dinner. Many of the kids were international students, while others were U.S. students who weren't able to get home for the holiday. The Nikiases couldn't abide the thought of them rattling around near-empty dorms and a ghost town of a campus.

This couple had personal experience with that. They both grew up on the island of Cyprus and earned their undergraduate degrees in Athens before venturing to a far-off land called Buffalo to pursue graduate degrees at the State University of New York.

The dinner, Max said, was Niki's idea, and "I think she came up with it because we both remember very well, when we came to this country as graduate students, the first two or three years were very lonely on Thanksgiving Day. Everything was closed and you don't have a family anywhere to go to for Thanksgiving Day."

It has since become an annual tradition. Max unleashed that laugh



again. “The last couple of years, we noticed that we also get local kids,” he said. “From Pasadena, Arcadia. They come for the dinner.”

Niki interjected: “Their parents are working. They have no other place to go. We’d been doing that with our daughters’ friends for years. ‘They have nowhere else to go. Can we bring them?’”

Reed, the USC trustee, said that it is a mutually beneficial occasion, because Max and Niki “love the kids, being with them and mingling. It gives them a chance to have some one-on-one conversations with them. Talking to the kids is a highlight of their year.”

Many of the functions at the USC President’s House provide obvious opportunities for fundraising, and the benefits have been tangible. Upon taking over as president, Nikias set a goal of raising \$6 billion over eight years. At the close of this year, halfway through

the campaign, he anticipates donations to be at \$3.6 billion.

The couple have been creative in these efforts, too. As part of the renovations of the home, Niki asked that a bedroom suite be created on the ground floor. Max says he “half-joking, half-serious” refers to it as the Lincoln Bedroom, because an overnight stay in those quarters costs \$1 million, “payable to USC.”

Guests stay up late chatting with their hosts and have breakfast with them in the morning. It’s certainly a much more intimate experience than crowding under the tent with 350 others in the backyard.

Nikias related a story about the overnight visit of David and Dana Dornsife, who donated \$200 million to USC’s College of Arts and Letters, which, no surprise, now bears their name. After breakfast the next morning, Max had to get downtown to his office, but told the Dornsifes they were free

to linger and stroll the property. He chuckled at the memory: “I got a text from Dana: ‘Thank you, Max, we had a great time; 199 nights to go.’”

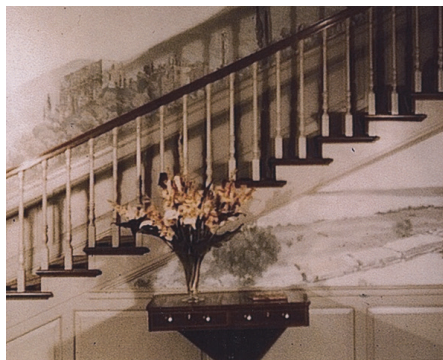
The press of these social encounters — large and small — is unrelenting. Nikias said that from late August when the school year begins until mid-December, he and his wife have no more than a dozen nights to themselves in the house. They savor that time together.

The two take exercise walks of several miles in the neighborhood. They slip out to their favorite restaurant, San Marino Seafood. Occasionally they sneak off to a movie in Pasadena. But often the time is spent simply enjoying their surroundings. Max calls San Marino “the little secret of Los Angeles,” and said he loves the mature trees and lush greenery of the community. Niki added: “You are far away from Los Angeles, and yet you are so close. It’s very serene.”

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And they've gotten quite comfortable in the house itself. It was built in 1932 by architect Reginald Johnson, who is noted for the Santa Barbara Biltmore Hotel. Paneling was brought over from a manor house in England, and rooms in the house had to be designed in accordance with those panels' specifications, Niki said.

But their enthusiasm really begins to bubble over when they talk about the murals. What a bizarre coincidence they encountered when they moved into this house.

The Mudd family made its fortune mining copper on Cyprus in the early 1900s. One of the sons, Seeley (Harvey, the namesake of the college, was the

other), commissioned noted muralist Alson Clark to paint scenes of Cyprus on the walls around the staircase in his San Marino home.

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Even when their guest felt he had long overstayed the time allotted for his visit, the tour continued. Max produced a photo of a mural of the Byzantine monastery Antifonitis, which was right here at the base of the stairs. A door was opened onto a room so Niki could point

out some of that exotic paneling. They both gestured out a window toward a stand of trees in the backyard, where the roof of a small building peeked through the shrubbery — it is a playhouse, built for Mudd's daughter, and it has electricity, running water and a kitchen!

There seems to be no evidence whatsoever that the hospitality of Max and Niki Nikias is forced. Or rushed. This really does come naturally to them.

"The interesting thing," said Lorna Reed, "is that though it is the Nikiases' home, they truly believe it is all of the university's house. That's why they love to entertain so much. 'Come to your house.' It's a wonderful feeling you get as having a little bit of ownership."

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