

The Winchester Sun

CLARK COUNTY'S VOICE FOR MORE THAN 130 YEARS

Family celebrates success, freedom

Czech immigrants overcome political obstacles to achieve American dream



Elfrieda Gill Benes, left, celebrates the 30th anniversary of the Winchester Captain D's along with her daughters and co-owners, Simona Benes, middle, and Jarka Wells. (James Mann | jmann@winchestersun.com / November 4, 2011)

By Rachel Parsons

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Jarka Wells believes she has achieved the American dream.

After arriving in America in 1969 as a 7-year-old with two suitcases, speaking no English, Wells has become a successful businesswoman in both Winchester and Richmond.

"I feel, deep down in my heart, I am living the American dream. I came from absolutely nothing. Thanks to the community, we're doing good," Wells said.

The former Jarka Benes is the daughter of Jerry and Elfrieda Benes, Czech immigrants who became American citizens after the Communist party forced them to seek asylum.

"He wanted to do this for his family," Wells said of her father's business dealings.

This month, Captain D's will celebrate 30 years of business in Winchester, something the Benes family considers a milestone after all they have had to overcome.

Their journey to America began in the former Czechoslovakia during **World War II**. Elfrieda Gill Benes' mother, Elfrieda Gill, was captured by Germans and sent to a concentration camp. She was forced into prostitution and had no knowledge of what was happening to her children.

The younger Elfrieda was told her mother was dead and sent to a children's camp. After the war, she went to a convent and was eventually taken in by another Czech family.

Although Benes said her mother nearly died in the camp, she was able to make friends with an American soldier, who eventually snuck her out of the country by hiding her in his tank.

"The American soldier helped her. He say he help her out, and he took her over the border to **Germany**," Benes said.

Once Gill was in Allied territory, she was eventually able to move to the United States again with the help of her soldier friend and his family.

Benes grew up in Czechoslovakia with her adoptive family, becoming so close that today she says it is hard to say who she considers more of a mother, Elfrieda Gill or her adoptive mother. Her adoptive sister, Vjerera, became her lifelong best friend.

Still, Benes said she always wanted to know what happened to her mother. She was in contact with the **Red Cross** for 26 years before they were able to provide her any information.

"I said, 'I don't care if you find her dead or alive. At least I know,'" Benes said.

Eventually, the Red Cross found Gill living in Nashville, Tenn., running a government owned nursing home. Because of the Communist government in Czechoslovakia, Gill was not able to contact any friends or loved ones still living in the country.

"They told her we (Gill's children) were in Russia, not even in Czech," Benes said.

The Benes family received permission from the Czech government to visit Tennessee for three months.

Benes said she loved getting reacquainted with her mother, although it was difficult at first. Because Gill was half German and half Czech, the family had spoken German in the home. When Gill came to America, she forgot how to speak Czech.

Benes said growing up in a Czech family, she couldn't speak German or English, so she and her mother had no common language. At the end of the three months, Benes said she knew she couldn't go back to her home country.

The family requested more time in America from the Czech government, but the request was denied by the **Communist Party**. The Beneses were told to return to Czechoslovakia, or face criminal charges. They sought and were granted asylum by the United States government, eventually gaining citizenship.

"I was happy," Benes said.

Her daughters, Wells and Simona Benes, enrolled in school and Benes tried to learn English. Eventually, she picked up the language by watching TV.

Jerry Benes began working for the Captain D's corporation in Tennessee and earned a reputation as an excellent worker.

"My father was really good at what he did, and he moved up real quick. The company saw his potential," Wells said.

In 1971, Jerry Benes was invited to partner with two other men to open the Captain D's franchise in Richmond, so the Benes family moved again. Jerry Benes acquired sole ownership and, in 1981, opened the Winchester store.

"Captain D's is my family now," Elfrieda Benes said.

Jerry Benes operated the two restaurants until he died in 2004. Elfrieda Benes, now 75, is still majority owner of the restaurants and helps run them with Wells and her other daughter, Simona Benes. Both daughters grew up working in the restaurants, and are grateful for what their family has achieved.

In 1992, the family visited the **Czech Republic**, the first time back since leaving in 1969, a trip Simona Benes said taught her to appreciate her life in America.

“It opened my eyes when I went to visit for the first time,” Simona Benes said.

The suffering Elfrieda Benes endured during the war also has left an impression. She still does not like to talk about what she experienced in the camp, and the sound of an airplane frightens her.

“I still today cannot watch war movies,” Elfrieda Benes said.

Wells’ daughter, Kristi Haydon, is a student at Eastern Kentucky University and works part time at the Winchester store. Haydon said she has learned a lot from her family members, including the value of hard work.

“Nothing in life comes easy,” Haydon said.

Captain D’s will offer special deals throughout the month of November. Customers who bring pictures of themselves from 30 years ago will receive free hush puppies this week. The second week of November, 10 percent of all proceeds will be donated to charity.

The third week, there will be a drawing every day for free seafood. In honor of Thanksgiving, four \$25 gift certificates will be given away to children. The final week of the month, prices will be rolled back 30 percent, equivalent to what they were when the store opened in 1981.

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