

RESIDENT FEATURE

BY JENNA CAPUTO - PHOTOS BY ANGELA MIA PHOTOGRAPHY & CONTRIBUTED BY THE GRECO FAMILY

Sometimes life throws you a curveball...

THAT YOU JUST CAN'T SEE COMING.

How you handle that journey, and what you learn along the way, is what They were quickly discharged, and life returned to normal. Giovanni had defines you. It certainly has changed things for the Greco family.

Stacy and David Greco both grew up here in the Capital District. Stacy enjoyed dancing, ice skating, skiing, and playing soccer while David played baseball, wrestled, rode and competed in BMX competitions, and worked on cars for fun. They met while in high school when they both worked at The Circle Diner, a mutual family friend's restaurant. However, they didn't date-or talk-right away. It wasn't until a few years later when they bumped into each other at an Alive at 5 event that David asked her out.

Stacy's parents both worked at the VA Medical Center. She joined the center's summer student program that allowed high school kids to work in various jobs. Stacy had a different job assignment within the center each summer. Her favorite turned out to be working in patient registrations. "I got to meet a lot of veterans and their families. Interacting with the patients really brought me joy. They all had so many stories to share some of them you really got to know, and I would look forward to seeing them," she says.

The job sparked a passion for healthcare, but Stacy also had an interest in business law. Her childhood dream had been to go to law school, so she attended college as a business major while working for an insurance company. She soon realized it was not her passion. She was still drawn to caring for people. So, she changed her major and is now a Registered Nurse. Her nursing journey landed her on a cardiac stepdown, short stay unit at Ellis Hospital. Once she had her children, she switched to a per diem arrangement with Ellis so she could be home with the kids. This flexibility helped a lot once the pandemic hit and she could assist with virtual school. Once everyone was back in school this past September, she took a non-clinical position as a Birth Registrar for Albany Med.

David always had a passion for cars and for fixing them. At 17, he owned a Camaro, then sold that for a Corvette that underwent a frame-off restoration. Even as a kid, he was always taking things apart and rebuilding them. He originally went to school for Criminal Justice, then for business management, but like Stacy, he realized this wasn't his passion, and headed to Wyotech in Pennsylvania to become a Certified Car Technician. He is now a technician at Keeler Motor Car.

When Stacy attended her 20-week anatomy scan while pregnant with their first son, Giovanni, the doctor told her that Giovanni had a calcification on his heart, which is a soft marker for Down Syndrome. They declined the optional genetic testing, and the rest of the pregnancy went smoothly. However, when he was born, Giovanni was struggling to breathe. Whisked away to the NICU, Giovanni quickly recovered, and Stacy and David were reassured that he was the healthiest baby in the NICU. a healthy first couple of years and was always an active child. One

day, they all went for a walk around the neighborhood. Twoyear-old Giovanni rode his Radio Flyer tricycle while they walked from their house to David's parents' house, one mile away. Giovanni rode the entire distance. "The

> whole time we were thinking, like any parent, 'Wow-my kid is a rockstar! Is this normal? Can all two-year-olds do this?' We were so impressed," Stacy remembers.

Little did they know, just two months later, their world would change. Giovanni started attending nursery school, and like most kids, ended up with a cold. It soon turned much more serious with a high fever. The pediatrician suspected pneumonia and sent them for a chest x-ray. They hadn't even left imaging yet when the doctor came in and said that radiology had called to tell him that Giovanni's heart was enlarged, and they should schedule a cardiology consult. In the moment, they were only concerned about getting him better, so when Gio woke up even more sick the next day, they drove straight to Albany Medical Center where the doctors changed his meds. However, they made a point of

telling the Grecos to follow up with cardiology sooner rather than later. The Grecos knew at that point that the heart condition was serious.



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They attended their appointment the next week. David was on his way to meet them when the nurse performed the EKG, then left the reading on the table for the doctor. "It was glaring at me," says Stacy. "So I peeked and called Dave wondering if he could get there faster. I knew his EKG showed Gio had a hole in his heart." The doctor confirmed that it was an Atrial Septal Defect. It wasn't emergent, but should be repaired ASAP since if left untreated, Gio could have major heart complications by his 30s and likely would not survive into his 40s. "We left the office with our entire lives changed. We left there different people than who walked in. We had a child with a congenital heart defect (CHD) and needed open heart surgery. Our healthy, twoyear-old son, who was riding his Radio Flyer a mile to his grandmother's house two months prior was now 1 in 100 kids born with a CHD each year."

After the surgery, the doctor told them the hole in Giovanni's heart ended up being much larger than anticipated—the size of a quarter. Luckily, Gio recovered quickly and was discharged after only three days. He even carried his own suitcase out of the hospital!

Stacy had started searching for answers and resources right from the diagnosis. One day, an article popped up about an upcoming holiday event hosted by the American Heart Association's (AHA) Cardiac Kids. "I thought it would be good for us to go and was hoping to connect with others who had gone through a similar experience," Stacy says. "We were searching for reassurance and hope. The event was so amazing. We met so many wonderful people and families and children. It brought us everything we were seeking and more. The Cardiac Kids gave us hope and strength and gave us a sense of peace."

The Cardiac Kids host various events throughout the year creating fun experiences

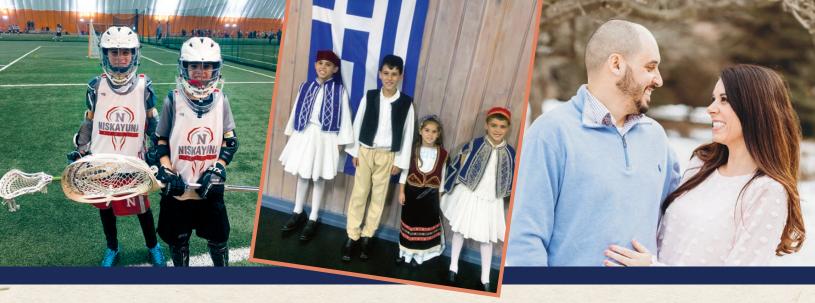
and support for children and their families. The Capital Region Heart Walk is a yearly event for the Greco family. Giovanni has also enjoyed events like the Cardiac Kids nights at Albany Devils Hockey and the Tri City Valley Cats Superhero night and attending the Capital

Region Heart Ball. "The AHA has provided so much support for our family and families like ours in our greatest time of need," says Stacy.

Giovanni is now 10 years old and a proud Cardiac Kid. Since they had caught the problem early, he has made a full recovery and currently has no restrictions, however, it is still a lifelong diagnosis and their family needs to be aware of any potential issues, even after a long, fun day of swimming races in the pool, like this past summer. Shortly after, Gio mentioned he had chest pain. Stacy figured it was likely a muscular issue, but since he didn't usually complain, and since they had always told him to

let an adult know if his chest was hurting, they went right away to have it checked out. "He really was his own advocate, which I have always taught him," Stacy says. "I was so proud of him in that moment. But it was such a reminder that





this is lifelong for us."

Thankfully, all was okay that day, however, the Grecos are always on the watch. COVID has added a new layer, but it has not slowed Gio down. He is still a very active and athletic kid and is happy to be back to school. Their experience has been a constant reminder of one of Stacy's favorite mantras—

"Strength grows in the moments when you think you can't go on, but you keep going."

The Greco family now also includes Luca (9), Nico (7), and Liliana (5). All three boys wrestle, play lacrosse and baseball, and ski. Liliana participates on the World Class gymnastics team and has started lacrosse herself. All four kids love taking out a bike or scooter to hang with their friends in the neighborhood.

Stacy likes to run, and the kids have started to join her. Each year at Thanksgiving, their family participates in the Cardiac Classic in Central Park. She volunteers at the school and is a room parent for all four children. David is a coach with Luca's and Nico's travel baseball teams, and he also coaches with Niskayuna Youth Lacrosse and Niskayuna Youth Wrestling.

As a family, they love to travel, especially near the ocean. They try to hit a new location each time. This past summer they visited Kona and Maui in Hawaii. This year they're hoping to visit family in Florida and spend time at their camp in Lake Luzerne, swimming, fishing, and kayaking. When home, they enjoy spending time together at sporting events, skiing, family game night, or by a backyard fire in the summer. Hitting up Lake George, the Saratoga Racetrack, and visiting any local parks and bike paths are also favorite Greco family activities. They believe in helping and caring for others. The Grecos try to give back as much as they can, whether through their volunteer activities or by helping out at the food pantry as a family.

"We believe in hard work, and that in order to achieve goals you need to put in effort, time, and slowly build the foundation for success," says Stacy. "I want Giovanni to know that his strength and resilience brought myself and Dave strength and resilience. He really taught us that even in our darkest hours you can always be brave. His CHD brought our family closer together and made us really take time and value the small things in life."

Stacy and David both come from large, extended families, so they place great value on family time and gatherings. Family always comes first! In fact, they've even begun to explore their Italian and Greek heritage to learn more about their family traditions and to pass them down to their children. David's mom was born in Italy and came to America as a child. His grandparents spoke very little English. David spent a lot of time with his grandmother, learning how to cook, bake, and even sew. He is now teaching the kids these special recipes. Stacy's grandfather was born on the Leopoldina, a ship heading from Greece to America. He was named Leopold after the ship, although everyone calls him Paul. The kids love Greek food, and Giovanni and Luca both did a report on Greece in third grade. All of the kids dance in the St. George's Greek Festival each year.

Their family may have gone through a hard time, but they have come out stronger, and they know they can handle anything together. "Know that sometimes when you feel like you are in the black hole of the unknown you are already climbing out and you don't even realize it, and then one day you can look back and see how much you overcame," says Stacy. "I want Giovanni to know that he is a warrior and can accomplish anything!" ~

Support Cardiac Kids by joining the Capital Region Heart Walk, scheduled this year for Sunday, June 5th at UAlbany. Funds support the Cardiac Kids program and aids in the ongoing research of CHD. More information can be found at CapitalRegionHeartWalk.org. Contact Kim Sheedy at Kim.Sheedy@heart.org for more ways to be involved.