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Nick Kostis' funny ideas

He dreamed of comedy and revived city's nightlife

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Where have all the years gone? ¶ Those vague measures of time seem to fly by in a blink of the eye. ¶ Not so with Nick Kostis. ¶ Yes, the owner of the Pickwick & Frolie on East Fourth Street is conscious of the years. He's even dedicating the month of May to them — 30 to be exact, which is how long his Hilarities comedy club has been in existence. ¶ But Kostis' time is measured by a different standard. ¶ "Every night, I look at that door and I wonder who's going to be walking through it," he says, standing next to the bar at Pickwick & Frolie on a busy Friday night. **SEE KOSTIS | c5**

Top: In 1985, a dreamer named Nick Kostis took a chance on some laughs. Thirty years later, his Hilarities comedy club at Pickwick & Frolie is one of the reasons downtown Cleveland is making a comeback.

Right: Chan D'Leer, a longtime performer at Pickwick & Frolie, credits Nick Kostis for instilling the confidence in her to become a showgirl.





Nick Kostis plays greeter and usher at Hilarities. The club, which opened in Cuyahoga Falls in 1985 before moving to Cleveland the following year, is considered one of the top 10 comedy clubs in the country. It has hosted, well, pretty much everyone, from Jerry Seinfeld to Eddie Griffin to Marc Maron, Louis CK, Frank Caliendo and Rita Rudner.

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KOSTIS

FROM C1

Dressed in his trademark slacks, white dress shirt and suspenders, Kostis strikes an unlikely middle-ground, somehow dovetailing the mellow congeniality of Bing Crosby with Robert DeNiro's cool player from "Casino."

He doesn't stand around long. Kostis darts over to greet a couple walking into the restaurant of the 27,000-square-foot, multilevel entertainment complex.

But he manages to add a punch line, with his typical sense of self-deprecating humor: "Some nights, I wonder if anyone is going to walk through the door. Hey, you never know."

We do know this: Nick Kostis will celebrate 10,950 nights in business on May 15.

"My dad lives night by night, always in the present," says his daughter and Pickwick general manager Dina Kostis. "And he's spent every night for the last 30 years doing it — because this is his home away from home, his baby, his dream."

Kostis, 72, is a self-diagnosed dreamer, but the rarest kind: He personifies the line by American poet and short-story writer Delmore Schwartz: "In dreams begin responsibilities."

"I believe in magic, in entertaining and elevating people and making them laugh," says Kostis, striding toward Hilarities comedy club, in the basement of Pickwick & Frolic. The show is about to start, and Kostis is rushing to do what he does whenever there is a show — namely, play usher, greeter and one of the most dynamic hosts you'll ever see.

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Its reputation is stellar, thanks in no small part to the personal contacts Kostis has built up.

But tonight is yet another night in these almost 11,000 nights. And there is a problem: The originally scheduled show scratched a week out, leaving Kostis to hustle up a replacement. You can sense the urgency in him as he darts to the club.

But not before he adds: "Hey, I gotta believe in magic. What else am I going to do?"

Well, he could have kept on working as a child psychologist.

The Brooklyn, New York, horn-and-bred Greek-American has always had a wide-eyed fondness for Manhattan, flashing lights, nightlife and a good floor show. But glitz and glamour are not supposed to be the path in an immigrant family — and it wasn't in Kostis' family either.

"I moved to the area in 1971 to work in the Oberlin City Schools, as a counselor," says Kostis, who holds a master's degree in counseling from Ohio University. "But then something happened along the way."

Well, a bunch of things.

By the late 1970s, Kostis was operating a vending-machine business, everything from snack machines to Ms. Pac-Man. By 1984, he decided to retrofit a garage he was using for the business into a bar — the Little Bar, in the Warehouse District.

"People loved to eat there," he says. "And I got a taste for the entertainment business."

He was licking his chops by the time he had gotten Hilarities run-



ning in Cuyahoga Falls. Located in an old theater, it played host to comics such as Tim Allen, Jimmy Walker and Gabe Kaplan.

"I couldn't believe that here I was able to get all these big names coming to perform in this small 300-capacity club in Cuyahoga Falls," says Kostis. "I'll never forget the closing line of the first comedian we had there, Dennis Wolfberg: 'I guess this is an example of going from the sublime to the ridiculous — or is it the ridiculous to the sublime?'"

Dina Kostis provides a different take, one that contrasts Nick Kostis' self-deprecating attitude.

"My dad worked so hard to get that place going," says Dina Kostis, who was 13 when the business started. "My mom used to bring me and my sister to the club and we ate dinner together, in the back and sitting on beer kegs. Then we'd bus the tables and do our homework."

"He likes to joke at his own expense, because he never wants to seem like the smartest guy in the room," she adds. "He'd rather understand people and inspire them — and he has so much energy that he always does."

In 1986, Kostis jump-started the Warehouse District rebuilding boom by opening Hilarities on West Sixth Street. For years, the comedy club was a lonely destination when the neighborhood was a hotbed for homeless winsos, not hard-partying yuppies.

It became a magnet for comedy fans all across the area, coming out to see acts such as Jerry Seinfeld. Kostis recalls the night in 1988 at Hilarities when Seinfeld received a fax informing him that his TV show was picked up by NBC.

"That's what I mean by magic," he says. "It happens in many ways."

"When I opened Hilarities in 1985, people said there was nothing happening in the Warehouse District," he says. "Well, you have to create something

that stands out on its own, and he thinks in groups," says D'Leer. "He was a real pioneer, being the first person on East Fourth, but he always saw it as a street and an idea, with a lot of things happening — and I always felt a sense of commitment to an idea with Nick."

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Above left, Pickwick & Frolic, the East Fourth Street entertainment complex that includes Hilarities, has seen a steady increase in the profile of its restaurant business thanks to a rerooled menu that emphasizes certified Angus beef and pizzas.

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came the brutal sucker punch known as the 2008 recession.

"It started in 2007 and lasted three full years — at least," says Kostis. "In the beginning, I thought we're going to beat this and get through it, but two months became six months, which became one year, two years and three years."

"I couldn't just close the place down," he adds. "This is not about money to me — it's about having a dream and also having a reputation, which is worth more to me than money."

Dina Kostis recalls the grueling impact on her father.

"He agonized over his staff and what was going to happen to them," she says. "That was the time when I came to really admire my dad — he showed this tenacity and stamina that I've never seen in anyone. He made up his mind that we aren't going to go down and kept fighting" until things turned around.

Rick Cassara, former owner of John Q's Steakhouse, recalls those dire days in the economy, and the toll they took on Kostis.

"I was struck that he never lost his sense of humor," says Cassara, who went to work for Kostis after closing the landmark restaurant two years ago.

Actually, adds Kostis, it made him even funnier.

"I had to laugh," says Kostis. "What else are you going to do when there's no one coming through the door?"

Last weekend, the doors were opening and closing constantly. In the last six months — about 180 nights in Kostis' world — business has been booming at Hilarities and Pickwick as a whole.

Cassara credits a general economic rebound as well as a growing downtown population and optimism tied to the return of LeBron James and the landing of the Republican National Convention in 2016. He also points to a new-found following with younger audiences that are discovering Pickwick & Frolic for the first time.

Kostis is less specific.

"I don't know how to explain it," says Kostis. "I think adding Rick helped a lot with our food, which has been receiving a lot of praise of late."

Cleveland comedian Mike Polk was sitting at the bar and had his own idea.

"The comedy has always done well here, because the reputation of the place is a draw as much as the act performing," says Polk. "But people are coming around for the food."

It took a while, thanks to a stigma associated with comedy clubs.

"Comedy clubs around the country are renowned for serving frozen chicken fingers — it's called comedy food," says Polk. "This place does so many things and does them well."

Kostis pops over to the bar when he sees Polk and cracks what he does so well: smiles, does a joke and welcomes the comedian.

Within minutes, he is escorting a party of regulars out the door and wishing them well.

"Hope to see you soon," says Kostis, as he walks away, only to turn back around and start another round of greetings and goodbyes with the next party.

As they leave, two women walking down East Fourth wave to Kostis.

"Are you having a good time?" he asks, as they nod and smile.

To some, Kostis is the Mayor of East Fourth Street. But to those who know him, he resides in a place called Dreamland, an imaginary place founed by 10,950 nights of heart and soul.