

# WINTER PARK

An exclusive magazine serving neighborhoods in Winter Park 32789

## Neighbors

### The Benenati Family

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Forever Home in  
Winter Park

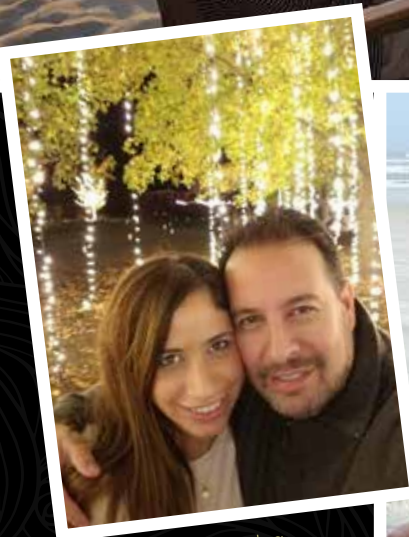


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The family enjoying an unforgettable sunset dinner on the beach during a trip to Aruba.



Liz and Walter enjoying time together in Asheville, North Carolina.



Michael and Camille making memories on the shore at their home away from home, New Smyrna Beach.



The Benenati's enjoying their latest trip to see their NFL team. They may not always win, but the family always has a fun time.

## The Benenati Family HAVE FOUND THEIR FOREVER HOME in Winter Park

BY CAROLINE MALONE

PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY THE BENENATI FAMILY

"I love Winter Park." That's what Lizmar Benenati said on a recent Saturday morning as she was sampling a taste of her six-year-old son's 'Joys of the Earth,' a delightful concoction made up of frozen yogurt topped with bananas, strawberries, granola, and honey. It's a popular dessert at Power House Cafe on Lyman Avenue right off Park Avenue.

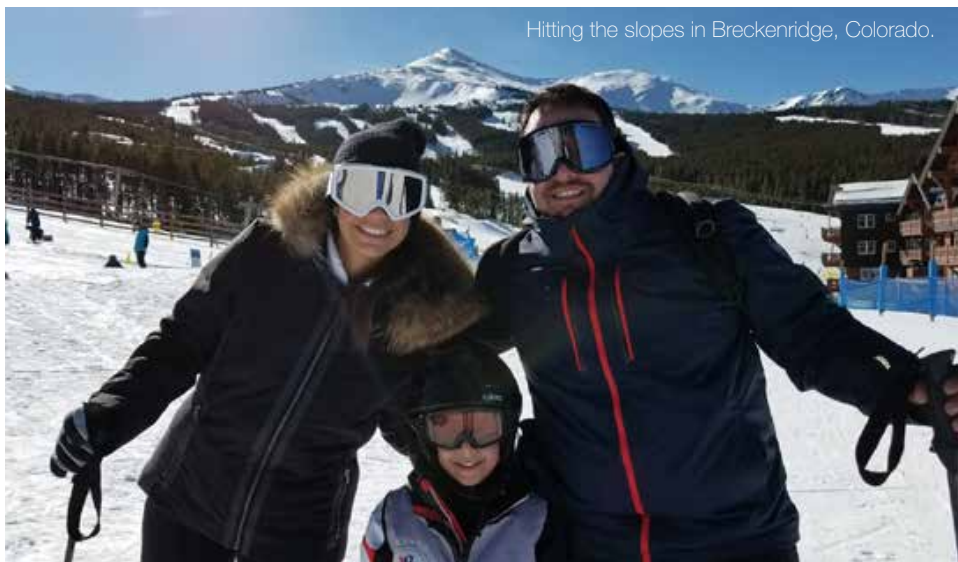
The Benenati's had just come from a soccer game sponsored by the Winter Park YMCA that was coached by Walter himself and decided to stop at the small family-run eatery owned by the Bassil family since 1998.

"It's perfect," said Walter Benenati. "We get to enjoy a nice meal and then my son and I sit down to get our haircuts at

Kennedy's Barber Shop right next door." Walter's barber, Jorge Morales, has been cutting his hair for years.

"What we love about Winter Park aside from the obvious—the beautiful tree-lined streets, shops, restaurants, and small town community—are the people," Liz said. "I am not sure what it is, but when you live in Winter Park, or you visit here, you will instantly feel relaxed and be enveloped by a serene sense of community. There are so many genuinely good people here, but many just don't know them or realize it."

"For instance Walter's haircutter Jorge—who travels to work in Winter Park by train getting off at the Sun Rail stop at Central Park on Park Avenue—recently donated his kidney



Hitting the slopes in Breckenridge, Colorado.

to his friend, 'just because he needed it,' Walter shared. "I was taken aback by his generosity when I heard that," he added. "A man of God, Jorge travels on a mission trip every year to give himself and any resources he has to people less fortunate."

These are just a few of the examples of why the Benenati's have made Winter Park their permanent home and they could not be anymore happier with their decision.

Take a walk around the Windsong neighborhood in Winter Park and chances are you will run into Walter, Liz, their children, Michael, 6, and Camille, 3, and their two Cockapoos, Mambo and Lola. When they first purchased a vacant lot in 2010 in Windsong, the Benenati's set out to find the best architect to design and build their home. They selected Phil Kean and couldn't have been happier with their decision.

"Building our dream house with a Winter Park based architect and builder made it even sweeter because we were contributing economically to a locally-based firm. It also helps that they are most wonderful people you will ever meet," Walter said. In 2018, Phil Kean Design Group was named the best custom homebuilder in the U.S. by *Home Builder Digest*.

"Whether a block party or attending a holiday event organized by the community director there is something for everyone here," said Liz about living in the community. "The neighbors are close knit and look out for one another." Walter serves as the President of the Board of Directors for the Windsong Homeowner's Association.

The Benenati family is happy to have made great friends in their Winter Park neighborhood. "We are fortunate to have our really good friends live right next to us," said Liz. "We have traveled together and are able to share in the delight of raising children that are also friends with each other."

The Benenati's enjoy an active calendar with their children. They ride bikes together in their neighborhood and dine out for breakfast on Saturday mornings when they get to ride in what their children have named the "Blue Car" -- a sky blue 1969 Pontiac Lemans that Walter restored many years ago and has been the family's fun car for outings ever since.

Spending the holidays in Winter Park is especially delightful with all the decorations and events like the lighting of the tree in Central Park on Park Avenue. "In



TOP: Always up for an adventure, Walter and Michael mushing a team of Huskies in the Rockies.



MIDDLE: Liz jokingly taking advantage of the anti-inflammatory effect of cucumbers before she dives into her salad at the Benenati's favorite pizza place, Boardwalk Pizza in Winter Park.



BOTTOM: During a recent trip to Toronto where the family got to experience Niagara Falls.

December, you can smell the smoke from the chimneys mixed with the cool brisk air while walking down the brick lined streets as a lake breeze comes on shore," Walter said. "It is unforgettable."

The couple was introduced by a mutual friend in 2008, and it wasn't soon thereafter that Walter proposed to Liz on an ice-skating rink in Bryant Park in Manhattan. In 2009, they got married on a seaside terrace at the Santa Caterina Hotel in Amalfi, Italy. And the rest as they say, is history.

The family loves the beach. Both Walter and Liz grew up near the ocean -- Walter in Fort Lauderdale and Liz in San Juan, Puerto Rico. They miss living close to the beach so they decided to get a condo at New Smyrna Beach and have fallen in love with the beautiful town. "We try to make it out there on the weekends," said Walter. "One night at New Smyrna Beach is like going on vacation for three days," he added.

Walter is a diehard Miami Dolphins fan and makes the annual pilgrimage to a Fins game every year with the family. As an alumnus of UCF, Liz supports her alma mater and attends games with the family every chance she gets.



Their son Michael also enjoys sports and has been playing basketball and soccer at the Winter Park YMCA since he was four-years-old.

The Benenati's have had the same babysitter for their children since they were babies. "One day we asked her, 'can you just come by every week?' and she did," said Liz. "It's one night during the week that my husband and I get to share a nice, quiet dinner or whatever we decide to do as long as it's together."

Liz and Walter frequently attend concerts and love the many different venues that Central Florida has to offer. Whether a small indie act at The Social or attending large concerts at Camping World Stadium and everything in between – they always find the music or setting they love.

The Benenati's enjoy dining at Hillstone's, Cocina 214, Ruth's Chris Steak House and their kid's favorite: Boardwalk Pizza on Lake Howell Road. "There are still restaurants left to experience", said Liz. Although the Benenati's admittedly are not avid readers, they love keeping up with current events on social media and the occasional tabloid news of what's in fashion.

They also enjoy vacations together and have gone to the Bahamas, Breckenridge, Colorado, and Asheville, North Carolina, recently. Since Liz was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the family makes an annual trip to the beautiful island every year to visit family and enjoy what the island has to offer. One tradition Liz brought from her upbringing in Puerto Rico was her love for Coquito. This traditional Puerto Rican rum drink is similar to eggnog but is coconut-based. Sharing the delicious beverage with friends and family is a Christmas tradition for the Benenati's.

Liz graduated in 2006 from the University of Central Florida with a degree in Marketing and Organizational Communications. Walter attended Florida International University and then attended law school in Miami at St. Thomas University of Law. He now has his own law firm which many may be familiar with from the buses, billboards and television commercials he has been on in the Orlando area. The Benenati Law Firm serves personal injury clients, as well as those going through bankruptcy and foreclosure. Walter understands that most unpaid debts are a result of medical issues, loss of job, divorce or bad luck. That's why his trademarked slogan is, "Life Has a Restart Button."

Besides helping clients obtain debt relief, the firm continues to help clients restart their lives. Walter is proud of his firm's success including recognition and numerous awards from Avvo, Super Lawyers, Florida's Legal Elite and a preeminent AV rating from Martindale-Hubbell, joining a select group of lawyers recognized for their legal ability and professional ethical standards.

Liz's background and education has served her well in her career as the Human Resources Director at the Benenati Law Firm. "We love working together and using each other as a springboard for ideas and decisions," Liz said. The Benenati's have generously established the Benenati Law Firm's Future Leaders Scholarship which is available to high school seniors who plan on attending an accredited four-year college or university or two-year accredited community college. Applicants must be pursuing a legal, medical, or business-related degree. This year's winner, Alexis Garcia from Tampa, was elated to receive the award.

"I established this scholarship to provide financial assistance to students who have excelled in academics and made a significant impact in their community," Walter said. "Alexis is a very deserving recipient, not only for her academic and civic accomplishments, but for her strength and determination in overcoming difficult circumstances in her youth."

In addition to the annual scholarship, helping those in need is a big part of the Benenati's commitment to the community – whether it's in their neighborhood, at church or at their children's school. The family volunteers their time and resources to many charitable organizations and Walter also works to help individuals and families in need at his law firm, providing legal services pro bono nearly every month on a case-by-case basis. Liz said, "You have to help those in need."

Walter recalls, "I remember a time in my life where I struggled mightily. Having lost both my parents while I was in college, I had to make it on my own. I waited tables for over ten years working every holiday you can think of including Christmas, Thanksgiving, and New Year's Eve. I grinded out college and law school while working full-time and worked hard at achieving what we have now. Now I get to take time to enjoy the holidays with my family."

Walter added, "You have to stay humble. We haven't lost sight of what is important in life -- family, hard work, perseverance, and giving back to the community to pay your good fortune forward. We have met so many families with the same virtues here in Winter Park. That is what makes Winter Park our forever home."



Proud of her heritage, Liz and the family recently visited Rincon, Puerto Rico, to attend a quinceañera for Liz's niece.