

## 15 MINUTES

## Long journey leads to Fort Myers

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"You know what my dream is?" asked Rina Frederick. "To see this whole country. I don't know if it will happen in my lifetime."

Frederick, 49, appears to find delight in the thought: a smile starts at her mouth, revealing widely spaced teeth, and spreads across a smooth, brown, work-worn face and somehow ends up continuing on passed darkly ringed eyes that tear slightly, and into her hair — tied back, a rough weave of black and gray.

She owns Wise Guys Subs and Stuff in downtown Fort Myers with her husband, Pat Frederick, and was born and raised in Be'er Sheva, Israel, a city of 185,000.

"I met some cute American and married," she said, whimsically critical of her foolish, youthful self. "He didn't want to stay there."

They had three children together in Israel, before moving to Lansdale, Penn., where her then-husband's family lived. Eventually, she said, the difficulties of adjusting to life overseas and of marrying at a young age led to divorce.

"I was 20," she laughed. "How stupid!"

Frederick attended night classes at Montgomery County Community College in Lansdale to learn English. She also learned to drive so she could go to the Orleans Technical Institute in Philadelphia.

"I only knew one route," she said. "The way there, and the way back."

She completed a six-month course in basic cooking and then, she said, "Everything was open to me.

"It was something easy; something I knew I could do. Cooking was not my goal in life. It just happened when I got there. I had no choice.

"That's when you really find out about yourself."

After four years in the states, she was granted U.S. citizenship.

"Pat was with me that day," she said. "It was exciting."

Her thoughtful pause underlined how momentous "that day" was. At the time, she was working the morning shift at Elm Terrace Gardens, a Lansdale retirement home, where she cooked for the 400 residents. Pat worked with her there in the retirement home's huge commercial kitchen.

"I learned a lot and started to get some confidence in myself," she said. "I was learning to speak English. It was hard, but a very good experience now that I think about it. I learned how to write a check in English; how to pay my bills; how to shop; all this stuff, I learned. I was a very independent person and I loved it."

Frederick would also like to note that she was then a smoker, and no longer is; she has unprintable words for the habit.

When her daughter decided to move to Fort Myers in 2003 to attend Florida Gulf Coast University, the whole family — including Pat and two other children — joined her.

"Why not?" she shrugged, affecting the manner of a woman still casually adventurous.

Upon arriving in Fort Myers, Frederick did not know where they would open a busi-

ness or live, just that they would. Their home is now in Lehigh Acres and their business is a deli in the small space at 2117 First Street, downtown — formerly Obees — across from the federal courthouse.

"It's getting better every year," Frederick said. "But everything's gone up — taxes, food costs, gas. And (business) is too slow."

She recently took a sabbatical from the restaurant business and its sometimes fickle financial rhythms, to visit her hometown in Israel. The focus of the trip was people — her friends, brothers, mother and father — and to eat "good food," she said, "like small falafels and shish kabobs, and other things like that.

"It's like living in two worlds: my heart is there, my home is here. I wish I could bring [my parents] here, but they want to die there. They don't want to come here.

"I know I belong there, but you try. Try to be a part of being an American. I feel like more of an American now than an Israeli, and my children do especially.



PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS FLORIDA WEEKLY

Rina Frederick makes Cuban sandwiches in her downtown Fort Myers restaurant.

"After all this, eventually, today, I really appreciate what I've got even though it wasn't my plan to come here."

Frederick, who is Jewish, said her beliefs — as well as personal tastes — don't permit her to enjoy many of the meat-and-cheese cold-cut combination sandwiches which are big hits in her shop during the business lunch hour. Instead, her all-time favorite Wise Guys Subs and Stuff sandwich, she revealed, just might be this one: tuna salad (homemade) on white bread with hot pepper cheese, lettuce, tomato, onions, oregano, salt and pepper.

Wherever your travels or adventures take you, she hopes to see you soon. ■

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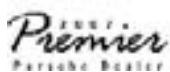


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