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Center Story #10

Today, we are publishing the 10th in a series of stories focusing on Commercial Center as written by noted long-time Las Vegas journalist, Diane Taylor.

In this article, Diane explores two unique and special food and hospitality spaces, Balkan Restaurant and Crystal Hall Banquets, both owned and operated by Irena Damianova.

- *Where was Irena born, and what did she study in her home country?*
- *What is Irena's favorite task at her businesses, and why?*
- *Why is having TWO businesses at Commercial Center a real boom to Irena's business?*

Irena Damianova, the Lady in Charge

She has four phones, two banquet halls, one daughter, and a family in Bulgaria that she calls once a day. Her favorite task at her business: cleaning the bathroom. No joke!

The “she” is Irena Damianova, one of Commercial Center’s best-known business owners, and an enthusiastic advocate for the Center’s long-term success. She attends meetings, offers her spaces for tenant gatherings and - in her spare time - arranges wedding receptions, birthday and holiday parties, and evening restaurant menus. She says her life is the epitome of the “American Dream”.

Born and educated in Bulgaria, Irena attended the University of Sophia earning a degree in bio-technology. In 1996, she was among a class of students who all made applications to enter a US-sponsored Green Card lottery for entry to the U.S. She was selected as a winner, had a follow-up interview, and was soon on her way to Las Vegas where a distant cousin lived, complete with her Green Card in hand.

Irena’s English was rudimentary, so she studied the language in a series of English classes and got accustomed to life in the U.S. She never worked in Bio-Tech except as a volunteer. She did, however, hold a variety of jobs as a waitress and in retail sales. Along the way, she had a daughter, Sophia, now 17 and sometimes a helper in her mom’s business. Irena even became a real estate broker.

Prior to COVID, Irena had a friend who worked in banquets and always wanted to open her own place. Irena was interested, as well, and the two ultimately leased the space that is now Balkan Bar & Grill.

Her friend ultimately had several personal issues which took her away from the new business, though she continued as a mentor to Irena. Though Balkan was intended to be just a banquet hall, Irena learned that during COVID that banquet halls were “nonessential,” so she converted part of it into a restaurant.

Later when Crystal Hall, another Commercial Center banquet hall, became available, she ultimately leased that space, as well. Crystal Hall was already a finished banquet facility, and it was easier for Irena to manage while she worked on improving the Balkan property.

COVID ended and the banquet halls were available for use by the general public. With word-of-mouth, social media and advertising, the customers came. Some visited Crystal Hall and later changed their mind and booked Balkan. Others did the opposite.

The holiday season is particularly busy for Irena’s businesses and, although she personally works very hard helping clients plan events, she says good business is a blessing.

Incidentally, her restaurant at Balkan is closed Monday and Tuesday and open Wednesdays through Sundays starting at 5 PM. The restaurant food is all delicious and made from scratch.

As busy as Irena is, she finds time every day to call home to Bulgaria and talk to family. She also closed the doors to her banquet halls and restaurant last July and spent a month with them helping to celebrate her father’s 80th birthday.

Irena says of Commercial Center that she is thrilled with what is happening in terms of security, cleanliness and plans for the future. She takes her staff to various other businesses at Commercial Center for team-building good times. And, she uses many of the nearby services as well, such as Hudson Cleaners and the uniform supply company.

Oh, about those four phones that Irena has? One is for Crystal Hall, one is for Balkan, one is to store photos for media use, and one is personal. And when Irena has worked hard and is weary, her favorite job is to clean the

Balkan bathroom. It's her private time with no phones. She meditates, thinks and plans.

Yes, the American Dream has many aspects, and it is alive and well at Commercial Center.

By: Diane Taylor