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Wednesday, 08 August 2012 17:07

Karaoke impresarios Kiki Gulan and Rosario Marchese make it easy for Port Washington area singers with a yen to perform, even wannabe Elvises, to take the stage

After Kiki Gulan and Rosario Marchese met at a karaoke event seven years ago, their romance blossomed and now they host popular karaoke shows at the Country Inn and Suites in Port Washington and Boondoxx in the Town of Port.

“Some friends talked me into going to karaoke. I had never done it before, but I always liked ‘Johnny Angel,’ so that’s what I sang,” Kiki said.

“Every time I went to karaoke, Rosario was there with his beautiful shoes and big camel coat.”

Rosario has a collection of shoes that rival a shoe store and wears a long camel coat in winter.

The couple — she’s 5 feet 3 inches and he’s 6 feet 8 inches — share a love for singing and entertaining and are each other’s biggest fan.

Their business, Serenity Now Karaoke, got its name from a Seinfeld episode in which George Costanza’s father Frank goes to a therapist and is told to shout “Serenity Now” whenever he’s frustrated.

“We saw the episode for the first time and I said, ‘That’s it. That’s our name,’” Kiki said.

Rosario, who has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, said he wanted to have his own karaoke business earlier, but he can’t be in smoke-filled rooms for long periods.

Now that restaurants and taverns are smoke free, he’s enjoying entertaining people.

Singing is good for his lungs, he said. He doesn’t use oxygen while working.

Rosario, who lived in the French Quarter in New Orleans, moved to Port Washington shortly before Hurricane Katrina hit. His mother was still in the city when the storm struck. She now lives in Port Washington a few blocks from her son.

“She comes to karaoke with us and even gets up and dances a little bit,” Rosario said. “If she’s brave enough, she’ll get up and sing a little bit.”

They celebrated her 85th birthday at a karaoke show.

The couple open their shows by singing a few of their favorite songs and perhaps a duet. Kiki likes Connie Francis songs, such as “Where the Boys Are.” Rosario often sings “Brother Love’s Salvation Show” by Neil Diamond and Frank Sinatra’s “That’s Life.”

Several large binders contain the songs people can choose from. Performers hand a slip of paper with their name and the song to Rosario, who puts them into the rotation.

“We probably have 500 songs in our repertoire,” Rosario said. “There are a lot of versions of songs. You have to get good versions people can sing to.”

The performers and their songs are kept in a database. If a few months from now someone wants to sing the same song but can’t remember it, Rosario can look it up.

While Rosario handles the computer end of the business, Kiki stands in the audience and encourages the singers, swaying with the music and mouthing the words. She then leads the clapping, making sure everyone gets a big round of applause and kudos.

“He runs the show and makes the people sound good. I’m out in the audience helping them feel comfortable,” Kiki said.

The couple have a following with regulars showing up to sing in a non-threatening situation.

“This is something for me,” said Carol Werking of Port Washington, who performs every Friday night.

“I love to sing, but only karaoke because you have the words in front you. You can concentrate on your performance and not worry about forgetting the words.”

Her first song Friday was “The Lion Sleeps Tonight.” She later sang Patsy Cline’s “Sweet Dreams.”

Nancy Carmody sang Carole King songs.

Ron Colby of Saukville was a crowd pleaser with his rendition of Elvis Presley.

“I grew up with him and started singing his songs early on,” Colby said. “‘Can’t Help Falling in Love’ has been mine and my wife’s song for 35 years.”

For that song, another performer gave Colby a pair of sunglasses with sideburns attached.

Friday night was the first time twins Michelle Howard of Cedarburg and Ginny Kropp of Omro

had been to Kiki and Rosario's karaoke. Each sang several country western songs on their own, then did a duet.

"We'll come again," Michelle said. "It's a nice mix of ages and people."

"We're not like any other karaoke show," Rosario said. "We don't want people up there screaming."

They don't allow drinks on stage, but as the evening wears on and inhibitions loosen, more people seem willing to go to the microphone.

When Bill Lorence of Port Washington does his impersonation of Dean Martin, he uses a prop drink Rosario bought for his act.

"He'll have fun with it and even turn it upside down," Rosario said. "I told him if I let you do it (have a real alcoholic drink on stage), I'll have to let everyone."

Swearing and putting down people are also not allowed. Rosario can pull the plug.

The audience can join in if the performer invites them to, but otherwise shouldn't sing loud enough to interfere with the person on stage, Kiki said.

Scott Pulver of Port Washington is a solid rocker who performs often, Kiki said. Another regular does great Cher and Madonna routines.

The best performers are those who choose songs they love or can relate to, Kiki said.

"We get so many singers who try the new popular songs, but if you don't have an attachment to a song, you can't put feeling into it," she said.

"If you can't put feeling into it, people are going to see that. When people ask what they should sing, we ask, 'What songs do you love?' Start by trying to sing your favorite song."

If people have a bad experience on stage, they may never try again, and that's the last thing the couple want. They're very encouraging and helpful.

The most important thing, Kiki said, is to have fun.

"If you're a good singer, bad singer or in between, if you walk out of here with a smile on your face, we did our job," she said.