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local **NEWS**

Originals

Cherishing her Greek Cypriot heritage on the anniversary of the Turkish invasion, Miriam Kikis tells **GERALDINE SCOTT** how she fell in love with the town that reminded her of the home she left

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Miriam Kikis's living room is packed to the brim with beautiful photos of her family and friends, immediately showing what is most important in Miriam's life.

"I value my friends very much," she said. "And my family mean everything to me."

Growing up in Famagusta, Cyprus, in the 1960s, Miriam was surrounded by family. "I had lots of cousins," she reminisced. "They lived in the villages and we lived in the town, so at the weekends we would have big family barbecues and picnics."

"My father would rent out a minibus and we would go to the monasteries and stay the night, camping outside."

Painting an idyllic picture of white sands and turquoise seas, Miriam became emotional. "That was before the coup," she added.

A military coup in July 1974, ordered by the Greek Junta, aimed to annex Cyprus for Greek control. Cypriots were relieved when they received help from Turkey, but this soon turned into a Turkish invasion, which effectively drew a line across Cyprus from north to south, cutting off Famagusta from the Greek Cypriot population. Much of the area is still inaccessible today.

"It was an extremely difficult time," Miriam said.

Two or three months after the invasion, Miriam accepted a place at university in Athens to study economics, but soon found that the lessons didn't go ahead because many lecturers and students were missing following the political unrest.

"Two of my uncles and my godfather were living in London at the time. I decided to visit them for Christmas because I was living in Greece and missing my family."

"They asked me if I wanted to stay, and I decided that I did."

Miriam worked hard and studied business in London before moving to Great Yarmouth when she was 19.

"Two of my cousins owned hotels in the town, I came to visit and fell in love as soon as I got off the bus. The seaford reminded me of home in Famagusta," she said. "I fell in love."

It wasn't just the town that captured Miriam's heart as Miriam was introduced to her now husband, Chris, with whom she had



■ Miriam Kikis pictured officially opening the new footway on the refurbished Vauxhall bridge in Great Yarmouth two years ago.
Picture: JAMES BASS

My family and friends mean everything to me

her first child, Kyrikos, in 1979.

A year later Miriam and Chris opened their famous Great Yarmouth restaurant, the Seafood Restaurant on North Quay.

"I knew nothing about catering," Miriam laughed. "But Chris is a real restaurateur, he always thinks about fresh ingredients first."

Thirty-six years later, the Seafood Restaurant, which was the first fresh fish restaurant in East Anglia, is still going strong.

Over the years, the couple entertained guests from far and wide, including many famous faces such as astronaut Buzz Aldrin.

They also welcomed another

“I’ve never felt a stranger in this town. The people are so nice, it’s where my children were born, this is my home

.....

son, Lenny, who was born in 1987.

"We have people come [to the restaurant] from Denmark, Holland, France year after year.

"Chris's brother even once met a

man at a bus stop in Japan who had been to the restaurant!"

Miriam puts their success down to hard work and determination. "And of course Greek hospitality!" she added.

Although Miriam and Chris have plenty of connections to Cyprus, Miriam is proud to say that Great Yarmouth is her town.

"I've never felt a stranger in this town. The people are so nice, it's where my children were born. I've been here for longer than I lived in Cyprus and this is my home."

Her community passion is shown by her involvement in various projects around the town.

"I feel very strongly about the town's heritage", she said, which is clear by her presence in many community groups and campaigns.

Most prominently, Miriam led the drive to restore Great Yarmouth's Vauxhall bridge, which connects the train station to the town. The bridge's makeover is now in its second phase, making the entrance to Great Yarmouth much more welcoming.

As for the future, Miriam isn't slowing down. As an active member of Yarmouth's Greek Cypriot community, Miriam – who has in the past taught English and provided translation services – recognises how difficult this time of year is as the anniversary of the Turkish invasion.

The community will have a quiet day and go to St Spyridon's Greek Orthodox Church on St Peter's Road.

"It will never be forgotten," she said. "It was such a shock and it was so quick."

Forty-one years on, Miriam said there are still 200,000 refugees waiting to go back to their homes and find out what happened to their relatives. Her own home in Cyprus is in a dead zone, inaccessible by anyone and surrounded by barbed wire. Just two years ago Chris heard that a relative had been identified in a mass grave using DNA.

"One day we'll retire and I hope to return to Famagusta, my home, my town", she said.

"Even if I return to Cyprus, Great Yarmouth will always have a special place in my heart."