

A Force of Nature, Compass Bound

Written by Nancy Lee, BT Contributor
October 2019

The daughter makes the commissioner



If it was a Sunday, six-year-old Daniella Levine had to scurry to get her canteen filled with water and lace up her hiking boots. It was time for her weekly hike with dad.

Miami-Dade County Commissioner Daniella Levine Cava is running for county mayor. I wanted to interview her, but I really didn't care about all that policy crap. I wanted to see what made her so resilient. And most of all, why she walked so damn fast.

I needed to know what kind of cloth this woman was cut from, and I was surprised at what I learned. Daniella was waiting for the usual questions and laughed when I began. "No one has gone this far back in my biography," she said.

I asked about her childhood. Her father was a wilderness hiker. He belonged to wilderness clubs and had a collection of books. He didn't just walk a mile or two. His Sunday hikes were 10 to 12 miles. The rest of the family was not interested in accompanying him. It was only Daniella who joined these Sunday treks.

They'd prepare for their hikes with maps and books. Daniella assured me she was able to fold a map correctly, a challenge in itself. Her dad would plan trips at least an hour's drive from home. Many of them were in the Adirondack Mountains. Sometimes they did part of the Appalachian Trail. Daniella preferred the trails. Her little feet would trip when they went bushwhacking, and

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she was allergic to poison ivy. She reminded me here that she was very good at identifying plants. She hardly had time to look, but she loved the stunning views.

I asked what she and her dad talked about. "I could hardly talk," she replied, "we were walking so fast, and my focus was on not tripping." But they did sing together. Daniella sang a bit of one of their favorite songs, "The Happy Wanderer."

I love to go a'wandering

Along the mountain track

And as I go I love to sing

My knapsack on my back.

"There's a rhythm to hiking," she said.

When she was very young, before she had the rhythm, her dad would say, "Hurry up, you're dragging." Then she'd run ahead. Sometimes, she said, she would drag on purpose. On one of their hikes, they happened upon a lake. Her dad was curious about the source of the lake, so he started bushwhacking off the trail. Daniella hated that, but on they went.

To get back to their car, her dad would plan circular hikes. When they couldn't accomplish that, they'd hitchhike back to the car.

Her mom would always prepare the same lunch -- a sandwich of meat and cheese, and a piece of fruit. Sometimes her dad would treat her to an ice-cream soda after they hiked.

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At that point in our interview, Daniella was so engrossed in reliving her past that she called the waitress over to ask if she had ice cream. The whole time we talked about these long hikes, she was smiling, and I was in awe. I walked nine miles once in my life, in flat Florida. It was grueling. To think that anyone could do this kind of walking every week on steep and rugged trails was unimaginable. This was one tough cookie I was looking at. Her father instilled in her a sense of adventure and perseverance I was never taught.

When Daniella was 13, the family started moving around South America for her dad's job. "He was building sawmills in Brazil and Chile," she says, "leading a public-private project to produce paper. He was always mindful and an advocate for reforestation and preservation."

The walking continued. She learned Spanish and was exposed to other cultures. The bonding hikes became less frequent as she got older. Her dad is 89 and now takes shorter walks.

An hour had passed. I looked at her across the table and she was smiling, and there was this serenity I wouldn't expect to find on the face of a Miami-Dade County Commissioner. I thought about her current run for office, something I wouldn't want to do if you paid me a million dollars. But then, I also wouldn't want to hike 10 or 12 miles every Sunday during my formative years.

We're such different people. I feel like she's made of steel and I'm more Jell-O-ish. I'm lazy, happy to binge-watch a show I'll forget the next week. That's not what Commissioner Daniella Levine Cava is about. She is about action. Twenty years ago, she saw a need and started Catalyst Miami on 27th Street and Biscayne Boulevard, and worked to help the underserved community in the area. She is a force. Don't underestimate her. She still carries a compass to keep her on the right path.

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