

# UpClose

FREDA WELSH AND CARLEIGH WELSH



Executive Director Freda Welsh, Chairman Janet Plotkin, Architect Peter Cadoux, Director of Marketing and Development Carleigh Welsh, and Director of Parks and Recreation/Building Committee Chair Stuart McCarthy

## Backstage

Summer traditions just seem to happen, but the Levitt Pavilion's roster of performers wouldn't be center stage without Freda Welsh and her daughter, Carleigh

BY JILL JOHNSON

Freda and Carleigh Welsh are to the Levitt Pavilion what the Wizard is to Oz. The audience at any of the Levitt's spectacular shows imagines a superhuman force backstage pulling it all together. In fact, two women deserve most of the credit. Not to mention, until this summer, the Levitt barely had a backstage.

Freda Welsh, the Levitt's executive director, first joined the board in 1980 and became chairman two years later. Even then, her daughter Carleigh was involved. "She was an

expert envelope stuffer as a child," says Freda, with a hint of an Irish brogue from her native Dublin. Freda attended high school and college in L.A. Her husband's job brought Freda and young Carleigh to Westport.

"I soaked up a lot of performances and fun at the Levitt as a kid," comments Carleigh, "and handed out thousands of brochures!" Freda, who came from an advertising background but had a passion for the arts, spent her time tirelessly fundraising for the Levitt.

"Even back in 1980 (the seventh season), the programming was ambitious," says Freda. "We already had fifty nights of free entertainment, the performers were paid—it was very professional. But the original bandshell, while beautiful, was a simple structure made out of plywood on top of a landfill!"

"It was rustic," chimes in Carleigh.

"It was primitive," corrects Freda.

After years of piecemeal repairs, the town finally deemed the stage unsafe. "It was going to cost \$10,000 to demolish," says Freda. "The fire department offered to burn it down as a training event. I got to light the torch. I was thrilled; it had become unmanageable."

A temporary stage sufficed for seven years, but "we needed a renovation to bring back the full breadth of the programming," explains Freda. "We needed wing space and wanted to give artists the biggest canvas

possible. With the temporary stage, it was like looking at the Mona Lisa in a Bed, Bath & Beyond frame.”

Carleigh, who majored in politics and theater at Brandeis and went on to pursue acting in New York (as well as produce *Green Eyes*, named one of the Top Ten Plays in *The New Yorker* that year), performed at the Levitt as Miranda in *The Tempest*. “The aspect of the storm figures prominently in the show,” says Carleigh. She recalls the clouds rolling in as if on cue. “That moment captured the beautiful marriage between performance and the outdoors. It felt like we were back in the Greek theater, and there’s just as much magic on the lawn as there is on stage.”

Having branched out into communications and marketing, Carleigh became the obvious choice to help amplify that magic at the new Levitt. “Other board members nudged me,” comments Carleigh, who gave up her New York apartment to move back to Weston, where her family has been for fifteen years. As the Levitt’s marketing and development director, she works “round the clock to make the summer come to life.”

This summer, after a \$9.5 million renovation (\$1.1 million from the town, with \$100,000 earmarked for environmental monitoring; \$950,000 from the state; and the rest from fundraising, including a “significant commitment” from Mimi Levitt), the Levitt will be livelier than ever. Architect Peter Cadoux, who remembers “seagulls diving into a trash heap” at the municipal dump where the Levitt now sits, embraced the opportunity to create both an iconic design and revitalize downtown in the process with a restored Riverwalk (wheelchair friendly and complete with guardrails made from recycled materials) and public sitting areas (not to mention, public bathrooms at last!). “I wanted to jump-start a social scene by creating a place where people can gather and chat,” says Cadoux. “I thought not only about design but about how people can interact.”

The project required six engineers to handle everything from sound amplification

to subterranean issues. “It was extraordinarily complicated as far as the site itself,” notes Cadoux. As far as the process, building committee chair/project manager Stuart McCarthy played a key role. “It was a rigorous permit process, but we never had a ‘no’ during one single hearing,” says Cadoux.

Though it was a controversial decision, Cadoux’s removal of trees proved visionary. The restoration of the Levitt’s spectacular river views brought Westport’s coastal character to the forefront. “Now you can see rowers going by,” he comments. “You can sit and have lunch at tables or on the grass overlooking the river.”

“It was starting to feel like you were in Sherwood Forest,” adds Freda. “There were a lot of invasive plant species. Now there are lots of plantings but they are all native.” Also, now anyone approaching town will notice the theatrical canopy, rising like a sail on a ship or a soaring wing, over the new stage.

Board Chair Janet Plotkin comments, “This transformed site with a state-of-the-art stage and hospitality center will allow us to catch up with our already outstanding programming and raise our bar even higher.” Considering Freda’s anecdotes of past shows—Keith Richards turning up unannounced to jam with Willie Nelson (“me and 3,000 others almost fell out of our chairs,” notes Carleigh), Ray Charles doing two back-to-back shows at Staples when his concert got rained out, then next time Ray cancelling (due to illness) thirty-six hours before the show and Michael Bolton and Roberta Flack promptly stepping in—the upcoming summers are sure to be star-studded.

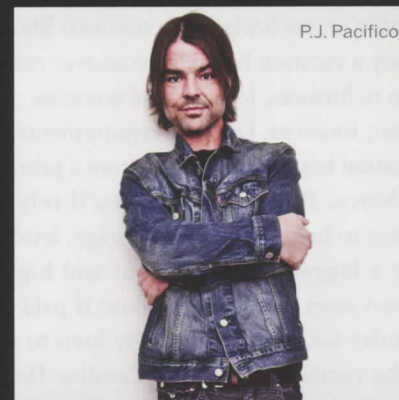
“The Levitt is truly one of our town’s crown jewels,” states First Selectman Jim Marpe. “I clearly envision the newly renovated, architecturally impressive Pavilion as a gateway to downtown and beyond....These are promising, invigorating times in Westport, and we are fortunate benefactors of the Levitt Pavilion’s resurgence along the Saugatuck.”

Cue the dynamic mother-daughter Welsh team. Time to take your bows. **W**

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Though the space may be new, for many musicians, performing at the revamped Levitt this summer feels like a homecoming. Just ask Norwalk-based singer-songwriter P. J. Pacifico. He remembers summers past when he was a part of the audience while his mom and other hometown heroes lit up the stage. Now, P. J. is no stranger to the Levitt’s stage. He’ll once again treat the crowd with his toe-tapping guitar melodies and voice—the perfect blend of honey and grit this summer. “The audience is so welcoming,” P. J. says. “We’ve always had great shows there.”

Who else is on the schedule? From Brazilian samba greets to kid-friendly entertainers every Wednesday, get ready to jump up, sing out and shake it along to the sizzling sounds of summer. —Kathy Satterfield



P.J. Pacifico

## SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

**EMIL ZRIHAN**  
JULY 29

This multi-talented singer fuses Moroccan and Israeli folk music.

**VENT DU NORD**  
AUGUST 22

Expect folk with a Celtic edge when these Quebecois masters take stage.

**INCENDIO**  
JULY 31

A passionate night of Latin guitar, jazz and world sounds.

**THE PINE LEAF BOYS**  
AUGUST 28

The Cajun and Creole sounds of South Louisiana.